Theories and Paradigms of Islamic Studies

The Arabs and Islam in Late Antiquity
A Critique of Approaches to Arabic Sources

Aziz Al-Azmeh

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Preface

This extended essay is a study of historical possibilities offered by Arabic literary sources pertaining to the history of the Arabs in late antique times, during the centuries immediately preceding Muḥammad and up to and including the Umayyad period. Its purpose is to redress the balance of judgement regarding the utility of these sources for the reconstruction of the social, political, cultural and religious history of the Arabs as they were still pagans, and to reconstruct the emergence of Muḥammadan and immediately post-Muḥammadan religion and polity. For this religion (including the composition and canonisation of its Qur'ānic scripture), the label Paleo-Islam has been coined, in order to lend historical specificity to this particular period, distinguishing it from what came before and what was to come later, all the while indicating continuities that do not, in themselves, belie the specificity attributed to this period of very rapid change, on an assumption that ends are often unforeseen and not necessarily inherent in beginnings. This view is defended extensively in my book *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allāh and His People*, to which this book is both a companion and a technical preface. It is also a book where the issues raised in the pages that follow are addressed at a different order of detail throughout.

Studies of literary sources for the Paleo-Muslim period have in recent decades been the occasion for sharp divergences of opinion and

interpretation, some, as will be seen, carrying with them an older repertoire of views of nineteenth century vintage, and of motifs that are much older still, best expressed in what I shall designate henceforth as the hyper-critical school. While it goes without saying that the historian should proceed according to criteria of veracity and in line with procedures of research that are cogent and credible according to the general canons of modern historical research, and while there is little dispute among scholars that Arabic narrative sources are often used uncritically and are beset by a variety of problems, this book will propose that they are neither unmanageable nor especially bizarre in themselves.

A related purpose is to put into perspective Arabic literary sources, their specificities notwithstanding, in a manner that would allay the impression of radical exoticism cultivated and sustained by the hyper-sceptical mode of interpretation and the vaguely narrativist and constructivist historiography it has come to adopt. Such a normalisation of perspective would, it is hoped, help to convey the nature and possible uses of Arabic literary sources in historical research undertaken outside the Islamic Studies academic establishment, where the hyper-sceptical motif seems to have taken a comfortable, but not a complete, hold, especially in Anglophone scholarship. In other words, it is hoped that the impression that Arabic literary sources have “a very unfamiliar appearance”[1] might be mitigated meaningfully.

The following discussions will set out to bring some order into the state of the field, after some three decades of uncertainty concerning, and rather cavalier disregard for, Arabic literary sources, a situation in which strength of persuasion is often mistaken for the compulsion of evidence. There has been a consolidated drift in the study of these sources towards concluding from their refractoriness and imperfections, features shared, it must be stressed, with many other sorts of sources from which other histories are written satisfactorily and to exacting standards, that they do not come

1 Cameron, “Literary Sources,” 8.

up to the documentary requirements of nineteenth century positivism, and that they are *ipso facto* to be discounted, or at best to have an undecidable value as historical sources.

In the absence of sources conveying history almost photographically, captured according to Ranke's not very profound call for history to be redacted "wie es eigentlich gewesen," some scholars of Paleo-Islam despaired of writing history altogether. The aim of the following discussion is to reinstate the feasibility both of reconstituting fact to a reasonable degree of probability, and to sustain the historical interpretation of this period. Like modern scholars, Ibn Khaldūn was interested in the transmission of historical reports. But, ever the realist, his ultimate criterion of assessing these was their plausibility in terms of the nature of human sociality *(ṭabā'i' al-'umrān*). A history "wie es eigentlich gewesen" is not possible, not least because of a fundamental confusion of registers. Yet this does not mean that historical reconstruction itself is not possible, however vexing the sources may be adjudged to be.

It will emerge from the discussions to follow that the frequent devolution of source-criticism, as generally deployed in the study of Paleo-Islam, to form criticism taken for a kind of High Bibliography, is not particularly productive. Such a procedure has an appearance perhaps far more unfamiliar to historians than the nature of the sources themselves when properly considered. Readers, it is hoped, might find in what follows encouragement to regard sources regarding Islam as less strange and unfamiliar that might be assumed. It is my assumption that, legitimate concerns about sources apart, hyper-sceptical scholarship seems in large measure to be contrived beyond what might be required by historical scholarship, and that such persistent perspectival distortion has had dysfunctional effects on the study of all aspects of Paleo-Muslim history, and has hampered the emergence and accumulation of positive results.

A case in point for the state of studies on Paleo-Islam is research on the Qur'ān, considered recently, after a century and a half of scholarship, to

be still in its infancy.[2] For the rest, one often gets more of an impression of perambulation. It has been suggested, presumably with some exasperation, that many major historical problems arising in the field of Paleo-Islam could only be solved by historians of Late Antiquity, the period being that in whose context Islam arose.[3] The need for language requirements apart, this suggestion might not receive much institutional mileage. But the point made does give sustenance to the need for historiographic self-reflexivity on the part of Islamic Studies, including, in crucial measure, study of this period in the overall context of Late Antiquity.

In all, study of the sources for the emergence of Paleo-Islam, and for the history of the Arabs in the period preceding this emergence, cannot be said to have crystallised into a workable body of material over which there is a consensus based on commonly accepted scientific criteria. This may indeed have something to do with the nature of these sources themselves, but it is also related to a recent polarisation of attitudes towards these sources, a polarisation which to a certain extent might be described as ideological, the term "ideology" being understood very broadly as a body of insistent presuppositions and preconceptions, some of hoary vintage, of extra-scholarly provenance. This is a polarisation that seems still to repeat, now with the infusion of contemporary political and "civilisational" passions and concerns, the different directions of nineteenth-century scholarship on early Islam and its emergence, in very much the same terms. Among other things, what this betokens is a long-standing institutional and conceptual introversion and stasis of scholarship on Islam, a peculiar institutional setting which has only recently begun to be modified, here and there, in terms of more recent trends in the humanities and social sciences overall.

I do not propose in the paragraphs that follow to survey the sources for the study of pre-Islamic Arab history and religion and Paleo-Islam, including Muḥammad and the Qur'ān. It is not proposed that the sources –

2 Neuwirth, "Ḳur'ān," 96.

3 van Bladel, "Alexander Legend," 196.

the Qur'ān, ancient Arabic poetry, the corpus of Arab heroic lore (the *ayyām*), the early Arabic narrative and other literary sources, Umayyad and 'Abbāsid antiquarianism (in many ways comparable to Roman antiquarianism of the Augustan age)[4] - be discussed in detail. Nor will the reader find here a detailed discussion of issues arising from the importance and use of epigraphic, art-historical and archaeological sources, which are of prime importance in writing the history of the periods of concern here and used in *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*. The intention of what follows is to establish a position relative to the currents of scholarship in place and offer an assessment of relevant Arabic literary sources overall, other orders of detail being taken up in the book to which this is a companion.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to Nadia al-Bagdadi, who gave time generousy to read and comment upon the pages that follow. Umayya investigated the possibilities of colour and tone, and chose one for the cover of this book.

4 On which see especially Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, particularly for the commentary, characterisation and analysis of Augustan archaising classicism in religion, sculpture, literature, and for the Augustan politics of Restoration, at 58 ff., 80, 288 ff., 342 ff.

1

Divergence of Source Interpretation: the *Methodenstreit*

In the concluding section of a major work, Josef van Ess commented on the *Methodenstreit* besetting studies of Paleo-Islam.[1] Insisting, characteristically, that questions of method should arise from the sources themselves, rather than from what he regards as some epigonal or parasitic relationship to disciplines other than Islamic Studies, he added that the parties to the dispute, particularly the party characterised by what I shall describe as a hyper-critical attitude towards the sources, were fired by institutional group-dynamics and what he calls "Fortschrittspathos," observing, rather hopefully but not entirely mistakenly, that we have now reached a point where "the old fronts" have lost their attractiveness.[2] Very broadly characterised, these "fronts" are the source-critical and the tradition-historical, the former originally identified with Wellhausen, the latter with Goldziher, followed

1 This *Methodenstreit* had already been noted, in 1978, by Morony, "Sources for the First Century," 20, before the disputes were openly to break out, with some acerbity, in the academy.

2 van Ess, *Fehltritt des Gelehrten*, 391, 388.

by Schacht in mid-century and the late twentieth-century Schacht "renaissance,"[3] after a period of abeyance during which the scholarship of Goldziher had not been much in evidence.

These two approaches to the early Arabic sources were established by scholars who in their times were pioneers: Goldziher, the veritable founder of Islamic Studies,[4] alive to contemporary philology and the history of religion, and Wellhausen, the founder of Arab history as a branch of international historical scholarship as well as "the Darwin of Deuteronomy."[5] Both approaches were revived a century later in terms of a dispute over the reliability and the very utility of Arabic literary sources for the reconstruction of the Paleo-Muslim period, with a considerable sharpening of boundaries.[6] The initiative was taken, and the challenge was offered, by a hyper-critical school, sometimes expressing itself often with a tart celebration of "Fortschrittspathos" expressed in daring and imaginative views, at others times with a plodding pace spawning one improbable conjecture after another, but in all cases with little conceptual alteration of certain nineteenth-century approaches to the writing of history.

Van Ess's is a conservative position, but is yet, not unlike Wellhausen's when regarded from today's perspective, one which draws on the strengths

3 van Ess, *Fehltritt*, 388. These positions, and their variations and interactions, are brought into particularly clear relief by Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 5 ff.

4 See the appreciation of Becker, *Islamstudien*, 1: 499-513.

5 Katz, *God's Last Words*, 305. See Becker, *Islamstudien*, 1:474-480, esp. 475 f., contrasting Wellhausen to Goldziher on p. 502. On method, see also Rudolph, "Wellhausen," 112 ff. and *passim*, van Ess, "Wellhausen," 40 f., and Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 178 ff., 186 ff., 261 f. Note the cautionary words on hyper-criticism by Nöldeke to Goldziher, recorded in letters of 24 October and 13 November, 1890 (Simon, *Goldziher*, 172, 177). Nöldeke ("Tradition," 160 f.) was later to be critical of the hyper-criticism of Lammens and Caetani, which he regarded to have been both groundless and unnecessary. On features of Nöldeke's approach salient to the discussion here, see Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 175 f.

6 This polarity is well described by Berg, *Development of Exegesis*, 222 f.

of philological research to yield historical reconstructions of considerable importance, and produces results that push far beyond what conservative scholarship might be expected to produce. In terms of approach, this conservative position tends to unite, without clamour, both sides of the "old fronts," as it deals with the fact that Islamic origins are seen to be largely undocumented, in the hard sense that direct contemporary documentation or witness is, with few exceptions, wanting,[7] and draws workable rather than nihilistic cognitive consequences from this condition, a matter to which we shall return below. The hyper-critical position, in its turn, is a view which could rather reflect a determined resistance to such documentation as does exist or as could be reconstructed.[8] In all, the terms of the debate seem to be starkly simple, counterposing confidence in Arabic sources, critical or uncritical, to the use of hyper-criticism as an elixir against credulity.[9]

Upon examination, it emerges that the conceptualisation of the hyper-critical position is rudimentary, in fact so simple, and so much given to expressing itself as if giving celebratory voice to the obvious, that it lends itself readily to formulaic and sometimes flippant repetition. Decreeing that, as Arabic narrative sources are late compositions, having been written some two centuries after the events they describe (recent research has narrowed the gap to ca. seventy-five years or even less, without altering the conceptual model), they cannot be counted on to provide reliable information on

7 Donner, *Narratives*, 3; Peters, "Quest," 304, 306.

8 Robin, "Réforme de l'écriture," 320.

9 This is well reflected in the polemical exchange between Serjeant and Crone: Serjeant, Review of Crone, *Meccan Trade* and Crone, "Serjeant and Meccan Trade." One must agree with Crone, "Serjeant," 237 f., that in the craft of history one needs to treat all histories equally. This would preclude the tendency of some conservative scholarship for special pleading, for mincing words on the assumption of an inter-religious protocol of courtesy and eirenism: thus, for instance, Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, vi, mixes registers and states that he eliminated from his text expressions which might imply that the author of the Qur'ān was Muḥammad, as well as expressions which spoke of Muḥammad's sources or of "influences" upon him.

Paleo-Muslim history. Whether such a conclusion is warranted, or adequate, and whether the problem posed thereby is real or contrived, will be discussed in what follows. But hyper-criticism does nevertheless, in its disarming simplicity, convey the impression that it is somehow irrefutable;[10] whether the refutation of a false question is really called for is another matter altogether. This postulate of historiographical inadequacy is compounded by maintaining that the narrative sources twisted whatever information may have been transmitted beyond recognition, when they did not in fact invent or counterfeit it. Ultimately, what sceptics seem to find wanting is an historiographical state of innocence, the perfect document that might be taken literally, and it is therein that resides the misapprehension leading to the falsity and artificiality of the problem.

Further, a rudimentary notion of documentary evidence is brought in to bolster the claim made for the ultimate inscrutability of Arabic literary sources. The supposed absence of evidence is deployed in conjunction with an anachronistic requirement of direct documentary evidence so stringent that it is not possible to meet in the investigation of most historical periods. Clearly, such a lack should not in principle present insurmountable problems, provided there be a readiness to deploy the standard techniques of the historical craft, and to move from declaring a hermeneutic of suspicion to a procedure of retrieval. Byzantine history of the seventh century, for one, is accessible through ninth century sources, "without Byzantinists being regretful of this," and the point has been made by a seasoned historian that the lateness of sources for Paleo-Muslim history which has led to rejection or hyper-scepticism does seem exaggerated, leading scholarship to "ever more enclosed discussions."[11]

There is clearly here a situation that appears distinctly odd, a tendency to over-exoticise source material to the extent of inscrutability, rendering

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10 Or at least the view that none has refuted it successfully, as in Hoyland, "Writing the Biography," 3.

11 Wickham, *Inheritance of Rome*, 281.

unthinkable the main task of the historian, that of going beyond the limits of sources in an effort towards historical reconstruction. The idiosyncrasy of the situation resulting from simple capitulation to the sources is apparent in a resultant vicious circle: building a picture of early Islam from sources that are then used to invalidate both themselves and the picture drawn from them, the matter devolving to an obsessive concern with source-criticism at the expense of all other historical tasks, ultimately reducing studies of Islam to *Quellenkunde*,[12] what I have termed Higher Bibliography. There is a resulting diversion of scholarly energy from productive lines and questions of inquiry to phantom and sometimes frivolous issues, as we shall see.

It would be well to keep a number of crucial matters in mind in what follows. We are never going to recover transcripts of Muḥammad's conversations, minutes of his meetings, log-books of his expeditions, his registers of booty seized and distributed, the *maʿāqil* he attached to his scabbard, physical records of his speeches or the original copy of the treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyya or the successive drafts and revisions of the so-called Constitution of Medina, nor are we likely to recover witnessed documents connected with the authentication of this or that textual fragment in composing the Qur'ānic text, or any registers from ʿUmar's *dīwān*.

But recognition of this absence of direct documentation is the beginning rather than the end of the story, leading the scholar to draw upon the skills of the historical craft and the procedures of historical interpretation in order to deal with such a situation; to suppose otherwise would be entirely unreasonable. When Schoeler attempted meticulously to verify the authenticity of certain traditions relating to the life of Muḥammad, his very considerable scholarship was adjudged by one reviewer, not untypically, to have been futile. Arising from Schoeler's supposition that such traditions might indeed contain material that is historically reliable, the judgement of futility, appealing to in-group dynamics of almost secratian density, stated baldly that "attempts at the reconstruction of hypothetical texts are the

12 Ibrahim, *Herausbildungsprozess*, 240 f., 242.

hallmarks of the non-sceptics," and as such contrary to the presumption of self-evidence of futility mentioned above.[13] The authenticity of a redaction is of course not in itself a guarantee of the veracity of a report, but the two are connected, and Schoeler, who has generally reserved judgements on veracity, has with his gingerly attitude generally imposed upon his work an ultimately deadening limit of remit, manacled to an artisanal habitus in scholarship.[14]

Thus the supposed lack of documentation has spawned some scholarship which despairs of historical reconstruction altogether,[15] and which is, as an explicit consequence, content with reconstructing later literary representations of the Paleo-Muslim period,[16] as a contribution to

13 Berg, Review of Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie*, 317. The same line of argumentation was adopted, in greater but no more satisfactory detail, by Shoemaker, "In Search," with the response, in the mode of restatement rather than of questioning of method, by Görke, Motzki and Schoeler, 'First century sources for the life of Muḥammad?'

14 The bottom line of this approach was well expressed in 1930 by Paret (*Maghāzī-Literatur*, 150 n. a): historical transmission is to be regarded as a "nur einigermassen objektive Wiedergabe des überkommenen Überlieferungsmaterials."

15 But not infrequently uses extant sources, by default, given its internal coherence: Peters, "Quest," 304.

16 For instance, Rubin, *Eye of the Beholder*; Vuckovic, *Heavenly Journeys*, who sought to move away from issues of authenticity to considerations legacy (pp. 7 ff.), which is not in itself illegitimate or uninteresting – see the criticism of Wansbrough (*Sectarian Milieu*, 117 f.) of the use of distant external sources to reconstruct Paleo-Muslim history. Yet so formulaic has this hyper-critical motif become, having acquired an air of parochial wisdom, that it has come to act, as we shall see, as a restraint on the effective use of the results of exact research, and has taken on the aspect of a refrain, admixed with a vicarious sense of modishness long after the initial enthusiasm of the 1970s and 1980s had gone rather musty. Thus, for example, it has become possible routinely to state, as an article of faith and without further scrutiny or consideration, that the *Sīra* of Ibn Isḥāq is but "thick description far removed from actual events" (Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 48). Further, the author of the article "Sīra and the Qur'ān" in *EQ*, following a fair overview of the contents of Ibn Isḥāq's work, finds irrepressible the proposition that it is all divorced from history (which he calls "historiography"),

what might be termed a history of mentalities, here made into a history of traditions, which is an altogether different theme with its legitimacy and *modus operandi*. Denial of a "documentary hypothesis" relative to this period has also produced scholarship which, concerning itself exclusively with the insufficiency of sources, has taken another path, unflinchingly proposing idiosyncratic and patently absurd counter-historical accounts of Paleo-Islam in order to fill the *tabula rasa* hyper-critically made available. That such works are entirely at variance with the traditional narratives,[17] and indeed fired by a "will to replace the text,"[18] is not the only problem inherent in them. Moreover, this approach has often been conjugated with the view that Islam was an entirely derivative phenomenon, born, for instance, as a Judaic heresy, the work of "Muslim Rabbis,"[19] or arising from a Jewish "sectarian

being entirely made up of legends and salvation-historical material, and that as a consequence attempts at historical reconstruction are simply "nostalgic" (*EQ*, 5:48 f.). The hyper-sceptical theses, source-critical as well as substantive, are integrally if rather carelessly put together in Holland's *In the Shadow*, described by one critic as a "tabloid view" of Arab culture of the time, who also informs us that the Dutch version, which appeared before the English, was entitled *The Fourth Beast* (Bowersock, review of Holland).

17 See especially Donner, *Narratives*, 26 and 26 ff. and Décobert, *Prophète et combattant*, 30 ff. The most systematic and consistent statement of this hyper-critical position was made by Bashīr, *Muqaddima*.

18 Grafton, "Polyhistor," 181, commenting on Ritschl's textual criticism in the nineteenth century.

19 Cook and Crone, *Hagarism*, 128. On the inappropriately Judaising vocabularies and terms of reference which govern this and similar works, see van Ess, "The Making of Islam," 997; Graham, Review of Wansbrough, *Qur'ānic Studies*, 140; Serjeant, Review of Wansbrough, *Qur'ānic Studies*, 76 f., regards this, not inaccurately, as a disguised polemic. Jensen, "Das Leben," 86 ff., 97, suggesting precise motifemic and sequential parallels between the life of Muḥammad and accounts of David in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament, and concluding that Islam might be an arabised Judaism, is a systematic precursor to this line of historical analysis. The question of direct textual borrowing, and the related question of universal motifs of epical stories, are not addressed.

milieu" in Mesopotamia, beginning, not in the Ḥijāz, but further to the north west,[20] or even among a pre-Nicene Arab-Syrian border community

20 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 196 ff., 204. Hoyland, "Writing the Biography," 20 n. 62, *pace* Luxenburg, quite sensibly wonders how northern Mesopotamia and Syriac Christian culture could have moulded the Qur'ān written in a north Arabian voice and style so dramatically different; Qur'ānic Syriacisms are more sensibly considered along lines suggested by Griffith, "Syriacisms." Nevo and Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, "Introduction," introduce yet other counter-historical refinements, including the suggestion that Muḥammad never existed (a view with a fragmentary history since the work of Snouck Hurgronje and some Russian scholars of an earlier generation, on which see Hoyland, "Writing the Biography," 11). The effect of such procedures is a particularly violent contortion of the geography and chronology of Paleo-Islam, described by one reviewer as being more akin to science fiction than to history, with arbitrary use of texts, numismatics, epigraphy and archaeology (Foss, "Unorthodox View"). A cavalier attitude to fact, along with an unwillingness to demonstrate and document a counter-history reconstructed on the basis of remote, tendentious sources, has been noted, as has been the frequent invention of narrative elements, such as "the intercalation of another caliph," Abū Bakr, to fill in a chronological gap in what is taken as an historical forgery by Muslim literary sources (see the comments van Ess, "The Making of Islam," 997 f. -- for epigraphic attestation of Paleo-Muslim personalities, including Abū Bakr and 'Umar, see Hamidullah, "Inscriptions," A and B at 434 f. and accompanying plates and, more recently, Ghabban, "The Inscription of Zuhayr."). Wansbrough himself declared his worry about the forcible extraction of a vocabulary of motives, ascribed to Paleo-Muslims, from the stereotypes of hostile observers (Wansbrough, Review of Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 156). One often finds, as in Hawting's *Idolatry*, attempts to show that the Qur'ān was engaged in a polemic against monotheists in Iraq, not against Arabian pagans, meandering around matters that are clearly demonstrable in order to prove hyper-critical theses, disregarding inconvenient evidence – even the hard evidence of epigraphy which is ejected for no convincing reason, despite the reservations expressed about its use (*ibid*., 112 ff., 129): see Saleh, "Fog of History," 2 f.; Donner, Review of Hawting, *Idolatry*, 337 col. 2. It might be noted that recent work in Arabic motivated in part by dissatisfaction with traditional narratives, and in principle receptive to hyper-criticism, has not reacted well to the turn to cognitive nihilism associated with the hyper-critical school. See Ḥ.

from Mesopotamia, settled by the Sasanians in Marw where they adopted Buddhist pilgrimage and purity rites, along with doctrinal elements, which they then brought back with them as they were about to found a new state and compose a scripture in an uncertain language.[21] In this perspective, the Qur'ān and Muslim narratives of origins involved a wholesale retrospective, narrative Arabisation.[22]

One cannot but discern here a determinate sense of the *Fortleben* of medieval anti-Muslim polemical motifs, not least in the Christianising redaction of this view of Muslim derivativeness,[23] which, in Qur'ānic studies, takes the form of an etymological alchemy whereby the supposedly foreign origins of words are taken to demonstrate a more general, generic dependence. One notes here a tendency rigorously to overdraw and

Ḥammūd, "'Alā khuṭā Wansbrough," alawan.org/alā-khuṭā-wansbrū.html (6 February, 2011), and al-Jabalāwī, *al-Istishrāq*, passim.

21 Gross, "Buddhistische Einflüsse," §§ 5.3, 5.5-5.7 and pp. 265 f.

22 Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 40, 45; Crone, "Two Legal Problems," 16. See the comments of Saleh, "Etymological fallacy," and Al-Azmeh, "Implausibility and probability."

23 This extraordinary *Fortleben* had earlier been expressed in terms of violent hostility to Islam by the often exceptionally perceptive Henri Lammens. See the comments of Rodinson, "Survey," 26, on Lammens' "pursuit of the apocryphal" and his use, without discretion, of critical tools which the nineteenth century had "used against his own faith," and the view of Wellhausen in 1913, who considered that Lammens took the *Tendenzkritik* of sources to absurd lengths (Rudolph, "Wellhausen," 144). That Muslim ritual and belief be simply "a hodgepodge of heretical Christianity, heretical Judaism, and idolatrous survivals" (Tolan, *Saracens*, 151) was a very common medieval polemical trope (Tolan, *Saracens*, 50 ff., ch. 6 passim; Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable*, most pointedly at 136, 141 ff.), and survives in some contemporary hyper-critical scholarship intact, with its terms hardly at all modified, although it is no longer so much Muḥammad who is the impostor as much as his collective legacy. On the waning of the idea that Muḥammad was an impostor in the nineteenth century, see Sinai, "Orientalism," 145 ff. See also Niewöhner's Introduction to Geiger, *Was hat Muhammed*, 26, and Heschel, "Abraham Geiger," 72 ff.

over-interpret the connection of Paleo-Islam to Christianity and Judaism, transforming this complex matter into a simplistic and, in essence, an exclusive explanatory model conflating precedence with both origin and causation.[24] But this is not in itself our concern here, focusing, as the present discussion does, on the question of Arabic literary sources, they being often regarded, almost a priori, with a combination of incredulity and scorn, thus facilitating primary recourse to other sources.

There is no doubt that hyper-criticism has caused historians concerned with this period to be more systematically demanding of sources, and more reflexive in their use of them.[25] A refreshing breath was introduced into a very conservative discipline, often marked by a solemn philological narrowness, and not infrequently ingenuously credulous in its use of traditional source. But the rules of this game have not been advanced by hyper-criticism. Wansbrough, the major patristic figure of this hyper-critical historiography, deployed a highly accomplished philology, but with a wanting historical methodology.[26] His was a philology that is conceptually aware, guided by German Old Testament research, although his "fear of tedium" precluded detailed historical work of the sort that German Old Testament research had been undertaking to control the excesses of Form Criticism, and to re-establish its connection with history.[27]

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24 This matter has been much commented upon. See Graham, Review of Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 140; Serjeant, Review of Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 76 f.; van Ess, Review of Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 138. For the systematic derivation of Paleo-Islam from Christianity: Lüling, *Kult*.

25 See the comments of Rodinson, "Survey," 27, van Ess, "The Making of Islam," 998.

26 van Ess, Review of Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 350, 353; Firestone, "Qur'ān and the Bible," 17; Neuwirth, Review of Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 541 f. Cook (Review of Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 180 f.) finds the form-critical results to be meagre, elusive and indefinite, and that Wansbrough, "this ascetic critic of the historical guild turns out to be a business rival," with an inescapable historical theory which is "demonstrably false."

27 van Ess, Review of Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 138. Crone, "First-Century Concept of HIĞRA," 354, notes that Wansbrough's theory is, in historical terms,

Wansbrough's rigorous Form Criticism, his exactitude of expression and conceptual precision, often bewildering to or missed by his acolytes, and his identification of Qur'ānic pericopes, helpful and sometimes exemplary as it may be, does not justify the conclusions he draws for a late dating of the Qur'ān,[28] nor does it salvage his overall interpretative and analytical historiographical premises.

Attempts at a revisionist counter-historical reconstruction of Muslim origins in this line of research have been unsuccessful. Nothing justifies the rejection of the Ḥijāz as the location for the genesis of Islam, or the assumption that Muḥammad's *hijra* can be reduced to a simple historiographical motif.[29] Nor does it seem likely that the personalities of the prophet and of Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiyya, of 'Umar I and 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān were conflated irretrievably.[30] That Arabic literary sources were late, at least late in the redactions in which they reached us, that they are sometimes in various ways formulaic and partial, that they contain chronological indeterminacies, confusions and conflations, does not render them intractable, neither does it justify the treatment of the uncertainties they convey as license vicariously to compose idiosyncratic counter-narratives.

More systematically ebullient assumptions, based on reclaiming the veracity of Christian polemical sources contemporary with the rise of Islam in contrast to the falsity of Arabic sources, cannot withstand proper

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insufficiently concrete to be of use in studying Qur'ānic material. It might be noted that this use of Old Testament material, out of phase with the development of Biblical research, does seem to reflect a tendency in studies of Islamic origins to use a rather bare form of concepts and methods from other disciplines, shorn of their complexity and further development. One might add that there is an inherent circularity in Biblical Form Criticism, in which form is used to establish historical influences, the latter being used to render form intelligible, on which see Hooker, "The Wrong Tool," 571 f.

28 Graham, Review of Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 140; Crone, "Legal Questions," 17 f. n. 48.

29 Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 79, 175.

30 Bashīr, *Muqaddima*, 158.

scrutiny. Deploying notions such as Samaritanism, Judaism, Persianism, Antiquity, Sadducees, and so forth as historical categories to reconstruct Islamic origins in terms of the language used by Christian polemicists,[31] produces a pseudo-history of names with little determinate content or indicative value for historical reconstruction. It postulates a vocabulary of motives from discrete stereotypes recorded by hostile observers, and this clearly worried Wansbrough himself.[32] There is throughout a wholesale rejection of Arabic sources,[33] a matter to which we shall soon turn, and simple neglect of evidence.[34]

In sum, hyper-criticism has been initiated by, and has reinforced, a thoroughly constructivist approach to Arabic sources, leading to boldly fanciful historical reconstructions, to the proposal of counter-histories, emboldened by an act of faith impervious to implausibilities inherent in such procedures. Hyper-criticism takes what it regards as the absence of conclusive and direct empirical evidence for evidence of definitive absence, opening the way to runaway fantasy. A relentless attitude of cognitive nihilism disengages historical writing from the realities of history. It consequently clears the ground for arbitrary counter-histories which, in the context of claims for incommensurability, reconstructs Paleo-Muslim

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31 Most notably by Cook and Crone, *Hagarism*. It is little surprising that we find here a restatement of an extremely conservative historiography, unmitigated by nuance, deploying the full arsenal of intransitive historical Substances. Thus, for instance, Hagarism's power to reshape the antique world lay in a union of Judaic values and barbarian force, Muslim monotheism was deployed with "primitive purity," the result was a profound dislocation born of the Muslims' inability either to assimilate or to coexist, and so on (*Hagarism*, 120, 122, 126). One might usefully recall in regard to the use of non-Arabic sources that all precise details from such sources relating to the conquest of Damascus are dependent on Arabic traditions (Schreiner, *Eroberung*, 449).

32 Wansbrough, Review of Cook and Crone, *Hagarism*, 156.

33 For instance, systematically, by Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 203 ff.

34 See, for instance, the comments of Serjeant, Review of Cook and Crone, *Hagarism*, 78; van Ess, Review of Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 351 ff.

history as one so exotic that its inscrutable character must, not unnaturally, be construed as hybrid and altogether bizarre, very much like the motifs of antique and medieval *mirabilia*, which also abounded in Arabic.

Yet one needs to consider the possibility that hyper-criticism is not a reasonable response to the credulity ascribed to the other side in the *Methodenstreit*. Historical sciences do have a variety of means for dealing with difficult and apparently unwieldy source material. It is to this that we now turn, bearing in mind the remark of van Ess quoted above, to the effect that the original excitement generated by hyper-criticism has had its day, that it is being tempered by means that are very far from being credulous or historiographically naïve, and, finally, that it has been subject to attrition arising from more than the dead weight of conservative empirical historiography, although this should not be underestimated. It is not for nothing that Crone was impelled to declare that Wansbrough's scepticism, justified in general as it is, was insufficiently concrete in historical terms, averring that "Qur'ānic evidence cannot be simply left aside," and proposing gamely, as a consequence, that she meet more traditional scholarship "half-way … by adopting it myself for the purposes of the present argument."[35]

Little comment is needed on this abandonment of historiographical rectitude for the purposes of "the present argument". But it is worth noting at this stage the clearly related matter that, even if one were to concede that the history of Paleo-Islam be largely undocumented in a direct, immediate manner, what there is by way of documentation tends to fit reasonably well into the broad outline of the broad traditional narrative framework and does not require or justify dramatic rethinking.[36] The pendulum in this particular debate is swinging back towards more sensible positions. Not long ago, clearly conscious of the congenital deficiency of the hyper-sceptical position, and with the well-honed impulse of a professional historian, Crone stated the following: "We shall never be able to do without the literary sources,

35 Crone, "First Century Concept," 354.

36 Donner, *Narratives*, 3.

of course, and the chances are that most of what the traditions tell us about the prophet's life is more or less correct in some way or another." The elements of reserve in this statement are likely to have been put in for the sake of a full measure, but the position is clear, to which were added expressions of optimism about gaps in our knowledge of the prophet's biography being filled in coming years.[37]

37 Crone, "What do we actually know."

2

Literary Transmission: Authors, Genres, Traditions

One primary factor which occasioned the various gradations of scepticism regarding Arabic literary sources is the view, neither remarkable nor surprising, that narrative sources reflected the concerns of periods subsequent to the events they narrate and during which they were composed, a view later enhanced and refined by reflections on motifemic and other kinds of literary patterning. Another factor concerns difficulties arising from material orally transmitted. We shall now turn to both in sequence, in order to show that the terms of the discussion are too much simplified and that the difficulties arising from the sources are by no means insurmountable or beyond the capacities of the sober-minded historian.

Initially, doubts were raised about the veracity and the authenticity of prophetic *logia* and exemplary deeds, the *ḥadīth*, by Ignaz Goldziher in the late nineteenth century, and these doubts were carried further, half a century later, by Josef Schacht, continued thereafter by the "Schacht

renaissance" of which van Ess wrote.[1] The reference being made here to *hadīth* has to do primarily with it being the first body of Arabic traditions treated in this way and in a consequent manner by modern scholarship, in a way that was to become paradigmatic overall;[2] it provided a template according to which works of history properly so called were considered. That which makes a specific historical narrative a part of what was to become, technically, *hadīth* (and the meaning of the term was broad before it acquired a technical sense with the constitution of this particular genre, used interchangeably with *athar*, *riwāya*, and *khabar*), quite apart from having to do with the actions and sayings attributed to Muḥammad which the technical sense acquired gradually, is not so much the nature of this narrative or of its mode of transmission. It is the result of it having been integrated into a specific literary genre, as the purposes of this genre's custodians developed, and as, in the fullness of time, it developed a number of formal technical desiderata.[3] For the sake of clarity, let it be said that a genre, though it may have a multiplicity of definitions, is in effect an open class of texts, embedded in cultural processes, whose boundaries are defined by distinction from other genres, and by their social carriers, as they arise: genres are literary institutions rather than only bundles of generic traits, and are often subject to redefinition.[4] It is not unnatural that, given the purposes of *ḥadīth*, considered in the sense indicated rather than with regard to its content, particular classes of thematic materials gravitated to this genre.

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1 An excellent review of these respective positions and their views of each other is given by Berg, *Development*, 9 ff.

2 It might be noted that, properly read, *ḥadīth* works, atomistic in structure, and with legal and pietistic purposes arising from a variety of settings, provide an important source for the study of Paleo-Muslim and Muslim mythology, social life, preserving many very ancient accounts. In many cases, the material transmitted arises from a common fund.

3 Ansari, "Juristic Terminology," 256, 258.

4 See Cohen, "History and genre."

But the narratives in their earlier phase formed part of a larger narrative repertoire prior to the erection of genre-specific textual clusters. Thematic materials in prophetic biography and a number of other genres of writing (*sīra*, *maghāzī*, *tārīkh*) intersect with material that was to enter *ḥadīth*, and it would be anachronistic to hold that material in these genres is derived from *ḥadīth*, or that they were exegetical in origin and purpose.[5] There is a tendency in modern scholarship to conjoin these genres indiscriminately, under the general title of "traditions," very diffusely understood in the turn given to this term by culturalist historism, and to treat them indiscriminately.[6] Genres of historical writing, *akhbār* and *tārīkh*, and *ḥadīth* are coeval,[7] and belong to a common repertoire of material, but they are, as they emerged and crystallised generically, distinctive in manner and purpose of composition, in a way similar to the connection between *ḥadīth* and legal traditions of Medinan practice.[8]

One should therefore speak by preference for distinction rather than for identification, still less for conflation and the effacement of boundaries.[9] Indeed, one of the main problems with this indiscriminate approach to early Arabic literary materials is the failure to distinguish genres, and the rules and requirements of genres, related to their waxing and waning thematic content,

5 Lammens' theory of the exegetical origins of Arabic historical narratives, making them *ḥadīth* and exegesis in disguise, is crucial for the hyper-critical school, taken over by Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 214 f. – see Hoyland, "Writing the Biography," 3, who also indicates (at 17 n. 10) that Rubin (*Eye of the Beholder*, 226 ff.) shows persuasively that exegetical elaborations were added to existing accounts.

6 Perhaps most systematically by Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 76 ff., where an unproblematic linear connection is postulated from Ibn Isḥāq through al-Wāqidī to al-Bukhārī, construed as a transition from *narratio* to *exemplum*. One needs to consider whether this actually represents a linear historical development, or a systematic conflation serving a totalising historiographical purpose. See also the comments of Hinds, "Maghāzī," 62, and Zaman, "Maghāzī," 14.

7 ʻAlī, "Mawārid," 157 f.

8 Horovitz, "Earliest Biographies," (1928), 25.

9 Cf. Leites, "*Sīra*," 53.

manner of composition, transmission and circulation, and a number of other features which call for deliberate study. These distinctions are reflected in the fact that these genres, and the sub-genres that developed in the fullness of time, did have names that distinguished the one from the other: *maghāzī*, *siyar*, *sīra*, *akhbār*, *tārīkh*, *ḥadīth* (a term which itself had a history before becoming the technical term that we know), and *futūḥ*.[10] The distinctions between these genres never implied the lack of intersection, and the variations of emphasis and interest within each are not insignificant, but the distinction needs to be made for practical purposes from around the late second and early third centuries of the Hijra, and it might well be said that traditions formulated by Ibn Abī Shayba, for instance, might well convey an idea of what traditionist historiography might have looked like before al-Bukhārī.[11]

The two questions raised usually, veracity and authenticity, are regarded from the hyper-sceptical perspective as overlapping. The whole matter is seen to hang on the reconstruction of a chain of authenticating authorities, the *isnād*, which, for Schacht as well as for many others, is marked by wholesale fabrication. But the whole argument has been conducted in broad parameters already set by medieval Muslim divines, terms that are comprehended by what nineteenth century canon of positivistic history called external criticism.[12] This procedure is preoccupied with testing chains

10 See ʿAlī, "Mawārid," 153; Hinds, "Maghāzī," *passim*; Khoury, "Kalif," 208 f.; al-Ṭarābīshī, *Ruwāt*, 37 ff., 41, 43. It would be interesting in this regard to look also at the terms used to designate what, with reference to pre-Islamic times, were known as *ayyām*, terms such as *ghazwa*, *sīra*, *waqʿa*, related to the reluctance to use *ayyām* for post-Muḥammadan events: Caskel, "Aijām," 4 f.

11 Zaman, "Maghāzī," 5 ff., for detailed discussion of the accounts of Badr and al-Ḥudaybiyya by al-Bukhārī and the earlier work of ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī and Ibn Abī Shayba, and the way in which the first tends to subordinate historical interest to the requirements of *ḥadīth* composition. More elaborately, Comerro, *Les traditions*, discusses the constitution of the ʿUthmānic codex as viewed by subsequent traditions of interpretation, especially by al-Ṭabarī and al-Bukhārī.

12 Bernheim, *Lehrbuch*, ch. 4, §§ 1 ff. For a discussion suggestive of an analogy with *ḥadīth* criticism, see *ibid*., pp. 524 ff.

of transmission, with emphasis on the numerical density of testimony, and is in many ways circular, correlating the authenticity of transmission with the possible veracity of the historical report transmitted, and dealing with a chain of witnesses rather than occupying itself with issues of historical veracity and verisimilitude *per se*. There are of course differences, basically of emphasis and of purpose, with modern criticism aiming to unravel circumstances, however crudely, correlative with various stages of transmission. But both scholarly traditions share concordant conceptual and methodological horizons.[13] Traditional Muslim scholarship called this *takhrīj al-ḥādīth*.[14] Thus the standard theory prevalent in modern scholarship holds that these chains of authentication grew backwards rather than forwards, and adopted as a cardinal operational principle the proposition that the more complete a chain, the later it must be.[15] These chains grew backwards, according to this view, because of concerns of the moment, theological as well as political, a view later developed to encompass all manner of stylisation, as we shall see.

The assessment of single authorities was, in line with traditional Muslim scholarship, concerned with these authorities' bias and factional and controversial sympathies, which seems in itself to have been considered sufficient ground for conclusive charges brought against them. Thus, for instance, in a review of the edition of the very important work of Sayf b. ʿUmar (end of the eighth century AD), one scholar rested content with highlighting this author's political views, particularly his partiality to ʿUthmān (but without indicating that he had no evident antipathy to ʿAlī, and evidently had a catholic view of the *ṣaḥabā*), and considered this identification of political sympathies sufficient for considering Sayf's

13 Noth, "Common Features," 309 f., overstates the interest in *matn* by modern scholarship, and indicates (309 n.1) that modern scholarship has paid scant attention to classical Muslim works on forgery, which might have been used beneficially in modern *takhrīj*, a view supported by Motzki, "Introduction," xxxiii.

14 See Brown, *Canonization*, 211 ff.

15 Schacht, *Origins*, 4 f., 165.

work to be, in effect, worthless as an historical source: “knowing more about the akhbārīs could of course mean knowing less of the past they wrote about.”[16]

There is little that is inherently unlikely in the view that some chains of authorities were fabricated, with some names supplied in the second century of the Hijra; this had long been assumed to be the case by medieval Muslim scholars.[17] Yet generalising this indiscriminately would seem to be decidedly contra-factual, given the evidence, if properly considered rather than dismissed *a priori*.[18] This position, as originally proposed, is based on a

16 Crone, Review of Sayf b. ʿUmar, 240. Much earlier, Nöldeke, “Tradition,” 169 n. 1, while holding Sayf b. ʿUmar to have been partial and “romanhaft,” would not allow himself to reach the same conclusion as Crone. More recently, and with regard to another work attributed to Sayf, one scholar denied the attribution on the ground, quite simply, that traditions attributed to him cannot with “isnād-cum-matn analysis” (to be discussed later) be traced back to a time earlier than the third quarter of the third Hijra century (Schreiner, *Eroberung*, 476).

17 Azmi, *Studies in Early Hadith*, 19.

18 Schoeler, “Mūsā b. ʿUqba,” 90, is only one among conservative scholars who have called for a proper re-evaluation of Schacht’s thesis, while Cook, *Dogma*, 108, could declare that “everyone knows” that the *isnād* grew backwards, adding sagely (at 111) that “it becomes a crucial question whether the spread of isnāds was a process operative on a historically significant scale, or just an ingenious idea of Schacht’s … and many of Schacht’s own examples of the spread of isnāds are proof only to the converted” -- Schacht’s thesis being nevertheless thoroughly in accordance with “the character and values of the system; and the pressure of elegance on truth is something entirely familiar to the traditionists themselves.” Rather more in accord with the working of the histories of traditions is the view of van Ess, *Zwischen Ḥadīṯ*, 187 f., that this was less a matter of counterfeiting than of actualising *ḥadīth* texts, an actualisation of transmitted words that are fitting for a given situation, giving rise to bundles of transmission that do not completely agree, but which are related in such a way as to facilitate reference to one authority rather than to multiple ones. This position would surely facilitate the choice between the two alternatives proposed by Cook, *Dogma*, 154: whether the hypothesis of pseudo-epigraphy in the late Umayyad period should be “preferred in its own right, or just a dialectical device for exposing the weakness of the argument for authenticity.”

slender body of evidence,[19] even if one were to admit its plausibility (but not its general applicability) in principle; the generalisation of this model seems well to have been impelled by "Zweifelsucht".[20]

What does transpire is that the authenticity of ascertainable transmission, whatever form it acquired with time, goes much further back in time, and is far more consistent and verifiable than is supposed by adherents of this school. The work of Schoeler on materials for some episodes in the life of Muḥammad attest to this very clearly, involving meticulous work on chains of transmission and of written and oral transmission, with the aim of uncovering common links (early collectors) and earlier recensions, and concluding overall that any fabrication of content be related to additions

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In both cases, the matter concerns the form of transmission in the process of forming traditions, not the material transmitted.

19 Complex beyond the way in which they are now construed and beyond the redactions of his imitators, Goldziher's views of the first Hijra century tend nevertheless to be quite summary, being clearly based on incomplete and unbalanced references; more precise considerations of fact would yield a different picture, not least as we know far more now than he could have known: *GAS*, 1:53 ff.; Azmi, *Early Hadith*, 8 ff., 15.

20 Fück, Review of Schacht, *Origins*, 199. Schacht also worked with slender evidence: Azmi, *Early Hadith*, 215 ff., 232 ff. For counter-factuality, *ibid*, 198, and Rubin, *Eye of the Beholder*, 235 n. 8 and ch. 15 passim. In detail, for the *Masā'il Nāfi' b. al-Azraq* discussed by Schacht and by Fück, as well as by Wansbrough, see Neuwirth, "Masā'il Nāfi'," 233 ff., and Azmi, *Early Hadith*, 244 ff. For Schacht on what is sometimes taken for conclusive conclusions from one Umayyad redactor, Schoeler, "Mūsā b. 'Uqba," 71 ff. On the same theme of contra-factuality one might counter the assertion of Wansbrough (*Sectarian Milieu*, 75 ff.) that *ḥadīth al-ifk*, the account of Muḥammad's favourite wife 'Ā'isha's disappearance while on journey, associated with the suspicion of a dalliance, be a later *exemplum* paradigmatically subsumed under a legal account of certain purity regulations (*tayammum*), to the very elaborate source-critical, *takhrīj* account of Schoeler (*Charakter und Authentie*, ch. 3, passim), which concludes that there are no serious grounds for doubting the historicity of the event. Overall, this tradition is one of those that would clearly not have been invented, putting, as it does, everyone concerned in a bad light, and likely to have been well remembered (Humphreys, *Mu'awiya*, 75).

and expansions without altering the core historical content. Even if chains of transmission were to be neither consistent nor verifiable, the matter would come to rest ultimately less with the authenticity of particular lines of transmission, which may indeed be unrecoverable in some instances, than with the content, contexts and networks of transmission,[21] and, ultimately, with judgements of plausibility that these considerations facilitate.

The contexts of transmission would then render the recoverable kernels of historical fact less a matter of judgement on the probity of transmitters, in the normal manner of medieval Muslim *takhrīj* scholarship, than one which would involve sifting through the sort of patterning that is only to be expected, in order to arrive, in a manner pioneered by Wellhausen, its relative simplicity notwithstanding,[22] at scrutiny of the content of narratives transmitted, without necessarily passing definitive judgement upon the detailed process of transmission itself, and ultimately to uncover a "Grundschicht".[23]

We shall come to this point later. For the moment, a little more might be said about tradition criticism, which has in recent years received rather more elaborate consideration and refinement than when first proposed by Schacht, including a "web model" for the history of transmission based on *takhrīj* procedures,[24] in a way that reveals such intricacy as to render the procedure unwieldy. To extend the metaphor

21 van Ess, *Fehltritt*, 387.

22 On the historiography of early Islam and the historical schools of transmission involved, Wellhausen, *Skizzen*, 6 ff. Most recently see Khalek, *Damascus after the Muslim Conquest*, 41 f. and ch. 2, passim, on the characteristics of the Syrian historiographical school of the second Hijra century.

23 Schoeler, *Charakter*, 17 f. As is well known, Wellhausen proposed differential reliability for the so-called Iraqi and Medinan schools of historical transmission; but the division seems in retrospect to be unjustified, given the relative incoherence, or rather, the complex diversity of both: Noth, *Historical Tradition*, 4 ff.

24 On further elaboration and refinement of the "common link" model (Schacht, *Origins*, 171 f.), and other, more complex models, see Juynboll, *Muslim Traditions*, 206 ff. and passim, and cf. Berg, *Development*, 31, 49.

somewhat further, the extreme formalism of procedure seems to have more in common with the forbidding image of a web than with that of a structure, and works in effect to ensnare some scholars in an heroically ascetic antiquarianism which, one would suppose, is its own reward, but the partial and detailed results of which, when they do emerge, can also be rewarding to scholarship overall.

Two points are of further interest before a broader vista upon Arabic literary sources is opened. One concerns the pursuit of the oldest attestations of transmission possible by the traditional tradition-critical methods (*isnād* criticism). The other relates to the ways in which the supposed concoction of chains of authentication is construed, ingenuously as forgery or disingenuously as a technical imperfection that is only to be expected.

The pursuit of the oldest texts, the establishment of documents or eye-witness reports contemporary or nearly contemporary with events they relate, is of course enormously helpful, and it is feasible in some measure;[25] its overall amplitude is still to be determined. But establishing the earliest redactions is by no means the sole means of seizing historical facts recorded by posterior sources, nor is it the only way in which the veracity of Arabic literary sources is to be judged; pseudo-epigraphic attribution and the substance of what is attributed to a particular author are very distinct matters. The two – transmission and the substance of

25 For instance, Schoeler, *Charakter*, 87 ff., 108 f., 114 f., 116 f. where, following analyses of texts and transmissions regarding the Qur'ānic *iqra'* verse, the author identifies the possible origin ('Ā'isha), a possible textual archetype ('Ubayd b. 'Umayr – d. 687-8), and a possible factual core, then tracing the possible genre-specific occurrences and redactions. On a broader scale, one might look at the recovery of what have been termed proto-*ḥadīths* in the corpus of 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr (von Stülpnagel, *'Urwa*, 55 n. 2 and 121 ff., arguing against Schacht). More recently, Görke ("Historical Tradition," 261, 262 ff. and *passim*) sought core elements in 'Urwa's account of al-Ḥudaybiyya through sorting out various reports and redactions, and Mélamède, "Meeting," 129 and 108 ff., sought the same in 'Urwa's account of *bay'at al-'Aqaba*. More systematically, see Görke and Schoeler, *Berichte*.

a report, *isnād* and *matn* – have different criteria of verification and for the estimation of verisimilitude, although the integrity of transmission, through a variety of redactional forms and stages whose mechanisms are quite accessible to the historical craft and to the human intellect overall, is one whose force remains circumstantial rather than probative. In an ideal world, the demonstrably close connection between a specific *matn* and a specific *isnād* serves to indicate the integrity of the transmission process.[26]

In spite of the manifest distinction between tradition criticism and the establishment of veracity or verisimilitude, the charge has been made nevertheless, with understandable residual pride and not a little *Zunftmässigkeit*, that those scholars who avoid or evade *isnād*-criticism are at best naïve, and at worst negligent.[27] Ultimately, what results from this procedure is a circular argument for the mutual dependence of the authenticity of transmission and the reliability of content, virtually without remainder. Clearly, we have here a rather pedantic notion of the document, leading to the requirement of the full and seamless authentication of all extant narratives. This is a requirement that grows more difficult as the matter is tackled in detail.[28] Underlying this unreasonable demand for full and direct documentation is an assumption of inauthenticity, interpreted as unreliability, unless the contrary is demonstrated in detail.[29] This particular bait has lured some fair-minded scholars of painstaking thoroughness; among them is Motzki, who proposed in this spirit that a biography of Muḥammad will be a possible

26 Motzki, "Collection," 28 f.

27 Berg, *Development*, 219.

28 See the remarks of Berg, *Development*, 227.

29 Thus Cook, *Muhammad*, 67: "The usual practice is to accept whatever in the sources we lack specific reasons to reject. This may be the right approach; doubtless there is a historical core to the tradition on Muhammad's life, and perhaps a little judicious selectivity is enough to uncover it. Yet it may equally be the case that we are nearer the mark in rejecting whatever we do not have specific reason to accept." Cf. Berg, *Development*, 31.

horizon only once hundreds of detailed studies have been undertaken.[30] Though such studies would be welcome, the assumption here is that sources will of and by themselves be sufficient for writing history, and that they speak for themselves. Unsurprisingly, concrete results from this type of analysis are meagre, and stopping at them leads, by default, to an agnosticism that reinforces moods of hyper-scepticism.[31] The view taken by the present author is that the accumulation of such studies of minute thematic compass can only crystallise once an overarching historical perspective is available, and such a perspective is readily available irrespective of this or that minor fact.

Clearly, what appears technically to be a stringent positivism inattentive to more recent developments in historical method devolves to procedural filibustering;[32] a technical and procedural question is made

30 Motzki, "Murder," 233, discussed by Nagel, *Mohammed*, 841 f., going on to assert that Motzki had landed himself in the hyper-sceptical position by default. Further, he questions, sensibly, whether the breathtakingly disturbing suggestion of hundreds of minute studies will in itself enable the construction of a plausible life of Muḥammad (Motzki, *Origins*, 72-3 n. 105, more sensibly proposes, in his study of the vast collection of ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī, that only a sample (around 21 per cent) of transmissions need be studied and compared with others, and suggests implicitly that the conclusions concerning authenticity might be generalised to the collection as a whole). In addition, Nagel wonders whether the identity of the murderer of Ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq would really contribute towards a better understanding of the topic at hand, and reminds the reader that the microscopic work advocated does little more than reproduce what has been known for a long time about the history of redaction, a redaction that needs to be pursued beyond the procedures of source criticism. See also the comments of Rodinson, *Mohammed*, xii.

31 Thus the elaborate, meticulous and lengthy deployment of the isnād-cum-matn analysis of sources for the conquest of Damascus result in a surprisingly meagre synoptic reconstruction of the event (Schreiner, *Eroberung*, 491 -3, and see 473 ff. – the procedure itself is explained with extraordinary clarity at 4-7). See the collection of detailed topical analyses in the same spirit by Motzki et al., *Analysing Traditions*.

32 Thus, in terms of this by now somewhat anachronistic historical doctrine, appropriated scantily, it is appropriate that some conservative critics of the hyper-

into a substantive bar to proper consideration. Even in terms of positivist historiography of the nineteenth century, such a perspective on the document would seem highly restrictive, subordinating what was then understood as philology, cultural-historical reconstruction, to what was understood by history, genetic reconstruction.[33] The hyper-sceptical view is seemingly not one that is susceptible to rational argument. It is built upon scorn for the sources in question rather than an historical engagement with them: not susceptible to rational argument, as this view does not appreciate that the onus of showing falsification lies with those bringing charges, the contrary expectation being "demonstrably unfair,"[34] and because it seems to approach the sources in order to find nothing in them, not in order to discover what they might able to convey.

Demonstrable unfairness and inherent implausibility are in themselves sufficient to vitiate the hyper-critical position. But the matter cannot rest here, as this position throws up a number of interesting themes collaterally. Some of these should be pursued in order that one would be better placed to deal reflectively with the materials in question, the vast body of historical transmission from Paleo-Muslim and pre-Islamic times of materials that go beyond the *ḥadīth* genre. It has long been maintained that it is implausible to suppose that there might have been a compact of

sceptical standpoint, when referring to an authoritative statement of method, cite against it Bernheim's *Lehrbuch*, the renowned primer of the positivist historical craft first published in 1887: Görke and Schoeler, "Reconstructing," 210 n. 8. For nineteenth-century positivist historiography in critical review, and developments since, see Iggers, *Historiography*, 23 ff.

33 Bernheim, *Lehrbuch*, 90 f. With a slightly different terminological protocol, Curtius (*European Literature*, 15) expressed this point as follows: "A narrative and enumerative history never yields anything but a catalogue like knowledge of facts. The material itself it leaves in whatever form it found it. But historical investigation has to unravel it and penetrate it. It has to develop analytical methods, that is, methods which will decompose the material … and make its structures visible."

34 Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, 365, 379.

historiographical deception and of narrative fabrication, or to presume a massive conspiracy, empire-wide and lasting over two centuries, in order to account for what Arabic textual traditions call *tawātur*, concomitance of transmission, a conspiracy which would have required almost miraculous capacities for invention, production, reproduction, circulation, management, and total systemic enforcement.[35]

35 For instance, Azmi, *Early Hadith*, 230 ff. It would be well to recall that scepticism about authorship arose from the profound unsettling of textual scholarship following the scholarship of Friedrich August Wolf on the authorship of the Iliad, followed by the work of David Friedrich Strauss on the life of Jesus and the historicity of the Gospels. Among other things, and with a poignancy particularly relevant to the matter at hand, this led to the eruption of the controversy over the authorship of the Shakespearean corpus, including absurd assumptions of the collusion of Shakespeare with most of London's writers, actors, courtiers, and printers, as well as the people of Stratford, all of which matters are well discussed by Shapiro, *Contested Will*, 78 ff., 83 ff., and passim. With regard to Arabic historical traditions, a backhand reference to Ossian (Hawting, *Idolatry*, 94 n. 14) is not particularly instructive. For a particularly elaborated and imaginative case, that of Zayd b. Ḥāritha, supposedly required by discursive patterning to pre-decease Muḥammad, one might consider why the increasing salience of social history to Islamic studies was ejected in a recent work dealing with this issue. A very detailed recent study investigating the notion of the Seal of Prophets chose to interpret the abolition of adoption in connection with Zayd as a fable of sacred history, patterned along Biblical lines, and driven by a theological anxiety leading it to affirm that prophecy was indeed sealed by Muḥammad (Powers, *Muḥammad*, pt. II, ch. 4-7, passim). Though the author may be right in indicating the possibility that Zayd may well have been a more important person in his own lifetime than later sources indicate (26 f. and *passim*), and although some exegetes thought that he might have been a potential prophet had he outlived his adoptive father (55, 273 n. 75 – in fact, MbS, 3:498, referred to in support of this, says that Zayd might have been a prophet had he actually been Muḥammad's natural son), this is no justification for claim that "theology" concerning the succession to Muḥammad required that he remain sonless, that his son Ibrāhīm needed to be killed by narrative in order to pre-decease his father, that Zayd also needed narratively to pre-decease his adoptive father (although it is charitably conceded at 149 that he may actually have existed), and that theological narrative required that

It is manifest that the traditional Arab narratives of the period with

Zaynab remain barren (54, 57, 69). The latter patterning of narratives (said at 97 to have been put in circulation between the middle of the first and the beginning of the second century) is undeniable overall. But these are not simple Biblical typologies; although the story of Uriah the Hittite does come to mind, yet there is no evidence that it was a source of inspiration and patterning, and one would need to think rather of the special prerogatives of chiefs in general, including apostles. Nor do these patterned narratives eliminate the socio-political problems posed by the actual abolition of adoption and permission to marry cousins. If Zayd had to be killed by narrative to prevent him from inheriting the mantle of Muḥammad's prophecy, it is yet clear that Usāma, Zayd's son, was strangely allowed by narrative to outlive both his father and Muḥammad, as were two other adoptees of the Apostle, Sālim the Mawlā of B. Ḥudhayfa and al-Miqdād b. al-Aswad (on whom see Juʿayṭ, *al-Sīra*, 2:74), for whom no claims for heritable prophecy were or are made. Curiously, narrative also allowed Muḥammad's two grandsons to outlive him (I thank M. A. Amir-Moezzi for this reminder). Colpe (*Siegel*, 211 ff.) also argued against a late dating of the notion of the Seal of prophecy, albeit not in the context of social history; van Ess (*TG*, 1:29) finds a connection with Zayd which was later, during Umayyad times, elaborated in the sense of confirmation of sealing, which was probably the Qurʾānic sense. Moreover, Landau-Tasseron, "Adoption," 170, 172, has shown convincingly that the prerogatives of adoptive sons should not be exaggerated, and did not entail blood liability or parity with the father's station in regard to marriage – thus contra Conte, "Alliance et parenté," 126 f., who maintains, unconvincingly, by philological investigation of the root b-n-w and from anecdotal evidence and the transmission of inheritance rights, that, among the Arabs, adoption entailed social equality of the adoptive son, and regards this as having applied to the case of Zayd. Moreover, note needs to be taken of the fact that the inheritance of leadership among the Arabs of the Peninsula did not follow necessarily the father-son line, but was more diffuse among determinate agnatic groups, and it is unsurprising that none of Muḥammad's successors in Medina nominated their own sons as successors. This constellation of themes would also call for the close investigation of a Tradition, repeated by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal and al-Tirmidhī, that the Prophet declared that, should there be a prophet after him, it would have to be ʿUmar (Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam, *Futūḥ*, 320) – a Companion who was *muḥaddath* like Abū Bakr (cf. *TG*, 1:5). In the same context, service to scholarship would be rendered by examining the provenance, setting and implication reports that ʿUmar declared that Muḥammad had not died (*US*, §§ 335 f.; details in

which we are concerned are beset by much unevenness, by contradictions, inflections and refractions reflecting a variety of views, actors, and discursive protocols, by retrojection, transposition and syncopation of authorities, and much else. Yet there is a spinal narrative nevertheless that might be ascertainable in terms of criteria of plausibility to which the textual material is related. It has been proposed that there was no singular authority that might have imposed conformity and suppressed variations and dissent, and that, for all this internal variation in the historical, pseudo-historical, and legendary or otherwise fantastic material transmitted, there is still a central narrative in broad outline. Muslims did not seem, anyway, to have had a broad common vision and a skeletal shared grand narrative of their origins until the end of the first Hijra century.[36]

In fact, discrepancies in the content of material narrated might be seen as tokens of veracity rather than the opposite.[37] More than three decades ago, it was quite rightly proposed that the multiplicity of

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Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2:233 ff.). This could perhaps be done in relation to Q, 3:144, generally set at Uḥud, where Muḥammad received severe wounds, leading to a rumour among his troops that he had been killed, with Revelation then referring to the possibility of his death and promising divine reward to those who would persist in the fight nevertheless rather than flee. Interestingly, when this verse asserting the mortality of the Apostle was recited by Abū Bakr against those who asserted he could not be dead, ʿUmar is reported to have indicated that he may not have heard it before (see Abū Ḥanīfa, *Musnad*, § 273). To complete this bundle of interconnected themes, one might also consider other reports, that Abū Bakr and ʿUmar were considered prophets, and pursue possible connections between these reports and the exotic *Nachspiel* of Musaylima's prophecy in Kūfa, and of course of other movements, emanating from eschatological milieus north of the Peninsula – on which see *TG*, 1:4 f. 29 f.

36 Donner, *Narratives*, 26 ff., 139.

37 Cf. Schoeler, *Charakter*, 163. Detecting indices of veracity in the lack of homogeneity and of a seamless patterning of material narrated has long been a response to polemical doubt of this sort. With regard to the Gospels, see, for instance, Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 2:15. In the ninth century, the Christian Arab polemicist, known under the pseudonym al-Kindī (*Apology*, 431 ff.), charged

versions, different in detail, of events both central and peripheral, are of such a scale that extensive collusion is impossible.[38] Many decades earlier, it was pointed out that the existence of much material which shows the Prophet himself and his early companions in an unfavourable light spoke against invention.[39] The one response that has been proffered by the hyper-sceptical camp to the case for the improbability, indeed the impossibility, of a conspiratorial compact, has been a morally-neutral answer to the unctuous strictures against alleged fabrication, namely, that what we have was an "honest opinion" rather than deliberately deceitful concoction.[40] In place of craven knaves we are given disingenuous fools, and in place of a fraudulent derangement, a real and objective self-delusion. Clearly, here implicated in this web is not a collection of bent or dim individuals in league with the powers that be, but systemic imposture in which everyone was complicit objectively.

There is far more to the case of the hyper-sceptics than the indication of absurdities. As indicated, it is well known that there was no attempt in the early Arabic sources to smooth over discordant traditions. In the case of the canonical biography of Muḥammad, one seasoned historian who is neither party nor susceptible to the in-house concerns of Islamic studies, has noted that material not conforming to standard narratives was not suppressed, with failures recorded, among other things.[41] There is also early material that did not eventually come to form part of the Grand Narrative,

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Muslims with inauthentic transmission on the grounds that their narratives of origin were far from seamless.

38 Morony, "Sources," 19 f.

39 Nöldeke, "Tradition," 166.

40 Berg, *Development*, 213 ff. The specific case here is the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās, aptly described as a personification of *ijmāʿ* (Wansbrough, *Studies*, 158), on which see the Gilliot, "Portrait mythique," where he appears as a topos, and Berg, *Development*, ch. 5, taking this point further. For criticism, see Neuwirth, "Masāʾil Nāfiʿ."

41 Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 416.

some of it appearing in later sources using material now lost,[42] and whose exclusion might indicate excision for reasons that are well within the reach of research,[43] such as the episode of Muḥammad and the Satanic Verses, to which we shall return more than once below.[44] The same would apply to materials on Umayyad history preserved by such as Ibn ʻAsākir or al-Azdī, which has been put to very good use recently, considering the interweaving of fact and motif, regarded as an opportunity rather than as an encumbrance.[45]

The reframing, or marginalisation, of episodes in Muḥammad's life generally concerned marginal matters rather than major lines of development,[46] but there is also a small number of significant episodes that have undergone streamlining and patterning – like the Satanic Verses, or the dating of the change of the *qibla*, supposedly from Jerusalem to Mecca. Overall, this took place in terms of transmissions that might not be intact or veridical, and that did involve tidying up and organisation in terms of traditions, often attributed to a collective agency, or allocated to one

42 For instance, with specific regard to the biographies of the earliest Muslims, the appearance in later sources of far more ample material than in earlier, "canonical" ones: Jabali, *Companions of the Prophet*, 13, who indicates an increase from 4,200 persons by Ibn ʻAbd al-Barr in the 10th-11th centuries, to some 8,000 by Ibn al-Athīr about a century later, to 11,000 by Ibn Ḥajar, three centuries later still.

43 Khalidi, "Battle," spoke in terms of a procedure of "damage control" leading to the excision of certain materials relative to the Battle of the Camel in certain bodies of historical writing. Cf. the comments on materials for the biography of Jesus in a similar context by Fox, Unauthorised Version, 204, 286.

44 See, for instance, Landau-Tasseron, "Redaction," 261 and passim, on the delegation of Tamīm to Muḥammad, and Lecker, "Did the Quraysh," 165 and passim, on the bayʻa of al-ʻAqaba. But the assumption, made under the pressure of the hyper-critical mood but against it, that all material outside the mainline traditions needs to be regarded as both ancient and true, cannot be regarded per se as a general rule: see Calder, "The Qurrā'," 307, in criticism of Kister.

45 Khalek, *Damascus after the Muslim Conquest*, 11, 12, 14, 56.

46 Schoeler, *Charakter*, 163 ff.

individual tradent who thereby comes to act as an emblem of traditional transmission in general.

But even then, recent stratigraphic excavation through the redactional layers and encrustations of traditional narratives, aiming to reveal their oldest layers, has noted much sound transmission – sound in terms of this procedure's parameters of authenticity – that is early, as has been suggested. A general point has also been made, based on a careful investigation of the transmission of exegetical materials, that the material does not justify an assumption of the wide proliferation of secondary attributions, and that the material received, in this case material by Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 718-722), contains a stable and reliable base.[47] With regard to Ibn 'Abbās (d. 686-8), a person with a "mythical image," the attachment of whose name to multifold transmissions has been discounted, not altogether satisfactorily, as inauthentic,[48] it might well be said that his name came functionally to play the synoptic role of a "collective *isnād*,"[49] performing the redaction of a synoptic report from various sources which is also, in effect, a statement based upon the results of *takhrīj*. In this case, as in that al-Zuhrī (d. 741) who might have figured sometimes as emblematising a collection of

47 Sinai, *Fortschreibung*, 166 f.

48 Gilliot, "Portrait mythique." Berg, *Development*, ch. 4 and 5, undertook a detailed statistical analysis of a limited sampling of exegetical transmissions attributed to Ibn 'Abbās. However, and quite apart from the terms in which he construed "exegetical devices" and other technical imperfections, the criteria he employed in assessing variations and estimations of consistency have been adjudged imprecise for statistical purposes. The employment of a more technical device (chi-square table analyses) tended to support part of his analysis of inconsistency, but does not admit his overall charge of inconsistency, given the consistency of other lines of transmission: Hollenberg and Rosenthal, Review of Berg, *Development*, 503 f. Clearly, this illustrates well a tendentiousness in the interpretation of data in favour of a hyper-sceptical conclusion, and of course the common, egregious leap made between the detection of "contamination" and an overall judgement of inauthenticity, automatically taken for ahistoricity.

49 Sinai, *Fortschreibung*, 270.

transmitters whose reports are redacted synoptically,[50] a redactional device of familiar character does not warrant a judgement of falsity, as there also seems little warrant for sanguine scepticism regarding the transmission of earlier exegetical material.[51]

Quite apart from rejecting historical narratives for no good reason,[52] it does seem that insufficient attention is paid to research that has tended conclusively to certify not only the soundness of certain lines of transmission, and to identify narration emanating from a very early period showing that elements of content, *matn*, had stabilised earlier than the sceptical approach would wish to allow, elements of content that came to form part of various redactional layers, modes and genres. Such features as these, with extraordinary concordances between different redactions and lines of transmission, and without attempts at harmonisation, have been well demonstrated in the cases of al-Zuhrī and of Hammām b. Munabbih (d. 719-720), brother of Wahb b. Munabbih and the author of one of the earliest compilations which was to have be a most important source for later tradents and compilations.[53]

So, for all Schacht's presumed lines of authentication composed in the second Hijrī century,[54] we now have instead systematic and fairly stable lines of authentication dating to ca. AH 70-80, with deliberate critical reflection on the *isnād* some half a century later.[55] Certain traditions

50 Cf. Juynboll, *Muslim Traditions*, 134 ff.

51 Noted by GAS, 2:xi, supported by the sceptical Gilliot, "L'exégèse coranique," 157 f. See also Birkeland, *Old Muslim Opposition*, 36 f. and Sinai, *Fortschreibung*, 163.

52 See, for instance, the arguments concerning letters attributed to Muḥammad by Hamidullah, "Inscriptions," 430 ff., who, for all his inclination towards authenticity of literary material he treats, does admit that such matters cannot be considered to be closed. A'ẓamī, *History*, 123 and fig. 9.9, refers to a letter from Muḥammad to al-Mundhir b. Sāwā preserved at the Topkapī Museum under no. 21/397.

53 Motzki, "al-Zuhrī," 9, 28 ff. and passim; Hamidullah, "Introduction" to Hammām b. Munabbih, *Ṣaḥīfa*, 62, 71 ff.

54 Schacht, *Origins*, 36 f., 71 ff.

55 Horovitz, "Alter und Ursprung," 43 f.; Juynboll, *Muslim Traditions*, 17 ff., 70 ff.; Motzki, *Origins*, 126 ff., 157 ff.

studied in detail indicate stabilisation with regard to lines of transmission, authorship, and the basic components of content, that might well date to a significantly earlier time, even, all considered, to the middle of the first Hijrī century. Elements of content are here understood in the sense of major narrative strands and their component elements,[56] including legendary elements which, by their nature, tend to be both glaring and fairly stable, and which seem to have been fully developed by the end of the first Hijrī century.[57]

This is confirmed by, among others, a study of one early transmitter of particular importance, ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 93-94/711-713), a man of extraordinarily good connections and of major consequence for the later transmission of a broad range of Paleo-Muslim materials. A painstaking examination of a corpus of some 315 self-sufficient *ḥadīth* narratives (reduced from some 2,000) attributed to him revealed two-thirds to have been authentic according to traditional criteria, and only about 50 to have been spurious, spurious in the sense of being later redactions of earlier texts rather than falsifications.[58] A considerable degree of credibility attaches to these recoverable proto-*ḥadīth* narratives, contra the opinion of Schacht.[59] The broad thematic units of ʿUrwa's work have been identified; they have been verified in terms of classical tradition criticism, including a consideration of discrepancies, and a full edition of extant materials is in preparation.[60]

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56 Cf. Motzki, "Muṣannaf," 14 f. and passim; Schoeler, *Charakter*, 14 ff.

57 Horovitz, "Alter und Ursprung", 41 f.; Horovitz, "Earliest Biographies" (1927), 559; Kister, "Papyrus," 563.

58 von Stülpnagel, *ʿUrwa*, 147 f. and 126 ff.; on ʿUrwa's life and milieu, ch. 1, for his presence in ḥadīth, ch. 3. For earlier appreciations, Horovitz, "Earliest Biographies" (1927), 542 ff. and Mackensen, "Books," (1936-37), 241 and passim. See also Schoeler, Charakter, 19 ff., 165, and Görke and Schoeler, "Reconstructing the Earliest sīra Texts," and idem., *Berichte*.

59 von Stülpnagel, ʿUrwa, 121 ff.

60 Some have already been published: Mursī Al-Ṭāhir, *Bidāyāt*. For the thematic content of ʿUrwa's work, and for the further verification of one theme, the

As for later transmissions and redactions, one might note the recent examination of the thirty-seven accounts of the so-called Satanic Verses, across the genres of exegesis and prophetic biography,[61] studying both lines of authentication and narrative content. The overall conclusion reached was that there seemed to be only one line of authentication that appeared to be spurious, the distinction between individual and collective *isnād* notwithstanding, and that consideration of narrative content showed little variation and clear evidence of early stabilisation, which by no means needs to exclude the re-arrangement of material, or of additions or omissions.[62] The stabilisation and scrupulous attention to the transmission of narrative (and poetical) material overall, of early vintage,[63] has been noted for other works as well, and editorial intervention of any sort seems to stop by the fourth century of the Hijra.[64]

Clearly, such research might well answer the blanket charge of invention and forgery, which was a ubiquitous preoccupation among medieval Muslim divines and is not a modern discovery. Overall, there seems little reason to doubt the authenticity of transmission and the content

hijra, see Görke and Schoeller, "Earliest Sīra Texts," 212 ff. The lines of attested transmission are indicated at 216

61 Prophetic biographies, particularly narratives of Ibn Isḥāq, material from al-Wāqidī preserved by Ibn Sa'd, the *Maghāzī* of al-Wāqidī, the *Ṭabaqāt* of Ibn Sa'd, and the *Ansāb* of al-Balādhurī, have been, with much justification, dubbed the Gospels of the Muslim Prophet (Ju'ayṭ, *al-Sīra*, 2:238). Some seven centuries later, Ibn Taymiyya had already, in a discussion of the Gospels contained in his anti-Christian polemical treatise *al-Jawāb al-Ṣaḥīḥ,* maintained that, thematically speaking as well as in terms of genre and in view of ultimate textual authority, the Gospels might best be considered as the Christian equivalent of the sīra and ḥadīth *(al-Muntakhab,* 442 f.)

62 Ahmed, *Satanic Verses*, 22 ff., 31 ff., 257 ff. The different versions are at 284-9.

63 See the comments on that most important redactor, al-Zuhrī, by Horovitz, "Earliest Biographies" (1928), 44 ff. and Dūrī, *Nash'a,* 86 f.

64 Schoeler, Oral and Written, 30 ff. and ch. 2, passim.; Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 418, 427.

of the basic narrative elements transmitted,[65] despite the gap of some half a century between the earliest attestable narrations and the events narrated,[66] a gap to which we shall turn shortly. Curiously, some scholars who have done meticulous research demonstrating the early vintage of Paleo-Muslim historical narratives like to underline the fifty- to eighty-year gap between the earliest attestable narratives and the events they relate in a spirit that is gingerly and almost apologetic, this supposed gap seemingly being readied as an eventual opt-out clause from drawing proper conclusions of veracity and historicity.

In this setting, one finds an insistence that the hyper-sceptical position is difficult to counter in principle, and an anxiety towards asserting any probative value for the results of research undertaken,[67] as if pleading fragility as a foil to possible in-house charges of gullibility, and disquieted by the suspicion that history might, in her usual way, be playing a mocking game with the historian. As suggested briefly above, one can discern in such reticence not so much a reasonable attitude of institutional caution as much as a wariness inflected by a simplified notion of documentarist positivism, or indeed by an "empirical fundamentalism."[68] This is a view which, in a confusion of registers that overlooks the distinction between the document and historical discourse, postulates "the unity of the narration with the document."[69] The evident fact that historical writing is distinct from the event itself, from a very literal reading of positivist "wie es

65 Cf. Schoeler, *Charakter*, 22, 167; Motzki, "Muṣannaf", passim.

66 Cf. Schoeler, *Charakter*, 21 f.; earlier: Paret, "Lücke," 152 and passim.

67 Thus Motzki, "Muṣannaf," 20; Schoeler, *Charakter*, 19 – reducing the fastness of this hyper-sceptical barricade, and indeed breaching it, without wishing to admit to having done so. This is in contrast to Ahmed, *Satanic Verses*, 25 f., who insists robustly that external evidence of fabrication is required, and that a line of authentication which, by criteria of isnād criticism, might appear weak, could well on this very account be taken to be genuine.

68 Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 546.

69 Croce, *Theory and History*, 289.

eigentlich gewesen" credo, is taken to be license to see historical narration as inherently distorting, it not being, as it cannot be, directly mimetic, and therefore open, in the simpler forms of the positivist perspective, as we shall see, to the charge of being fiction.[70]

It is only natural that the earliest Arabic historical traditions were indeed redacted, and were not the simple imprint of events, for facts do not, after all, speak for themselves, not even in their earliest record. Working through redactions is the staple fare of any historian,[71] who works through the feed-back loop of events and narratives in order to lend coherence to available material.[72] In effect, facts are not given but constructed by the historian, medieval and modern, as aspects of situations and not as entirely autonomous objects, situations that constitute their conditions of possibility and lend them sense.[73] Yet this need not necessarily and automatically yield a constructivist notion of history, as being divorced from *realia*. Rather, it seeks verisimilitude both of interpretation and of fact that is richer than the absurd exigence that historiographic rectiude consist of some photographic correspondence of fact and narration, without reflecting on the concept

70 White, "Factual Representation," 23. A richer appreciation of the continuum between event and fictional narration would be one which places the mimetic at one pole of literature broadly considered, and the mythical at the other. In both cases and in between, the imitation of nature produces not reality reproduced, but plausibility, and this varies between perfunctory concessions in myths and folktales to what would resemble the censor principle in the naturalistic novel: Frye, *Anatomy*, 31 f.

71 A standard primer of positivist history, Bernheim's *Lehrbuch*, 413, and 195 f., 480 f., was quite clear about eye-witness reports being themselves part of the events they relate, without needing to draw cognitively nihilistic conclusions.

72 Thus it would seem illegitimate to postulate "truth of correspondence" and "truth of coherence" as contraries (White, "Factual Representation," 22) in historical writing, although such a postulate is made implicitly in some classical doctrines of historical positivism.

73 See Stierle, "Geschehen, Geschichte, Text," 532, and cf. Borst, "Das historische <Ereignis>," 537 f.

of representation. In view of the misplaced apologetic mood indicated, with its self-confinement to misconceived and unrealistic parameters of veracity, therefore, what is needed is a passage from a notion of historical veracity constructed along the model of legal proof based on the probity of a witness, to one deploying notions of inherent probability and improbability more appropriate for historical research.[74] All of this is all-too-natural in historical reports and the writing of history; Arabic material is by no means an oddity and need not be taken to be an exception.

74 It is difficult to understand quite why judgements of probability have been seen as a 'capitulation' to the plenitude and contradictions of the source material (as with Schreiner, *Eroberung*, 2 f.).

3

Credibility and Factual Confirmation

The foregoing discussion brings us to matters directly germane to the narrative sources at hand, genres which will be considered briefly in the paragraphs to follow. The discussions above related to the literary domains of prophetic biography, and to Paleo-Muslim material more broadly conceived, namely *ḥadīth*, *sīra*, Qur'ānic *asbāb al-nuzūl*, all of which material appears in historical compilations, but all needing to be considered as specific genres.[1] These separate but intersecting genres do not represent exactly the same material, although larger works within these domains contain essentially the same range of material, as indicated above, stabilised around AH 100,[2] with a fairly secure chronological emplotment – the other sources, the Qur'ān, Umayyad and 'Abbāsid antiquarianism, and poetry will be treated separately below. In almost all cases, the question of lines of authentication is encountered, in somewhat different forms and with different kinds of histories

1 The genres are distinct in a number of ways, and relate somewhat differently to the theme of authentication: see Azmi, *Early Hadith*, 218 ff.

2 Horovitz, "Earliest Biographies" (1927), 535, 559.

of transmission,[3] but with similar questions regarding authenticity and veracity. Some topical clusters, for instance those relating to the Satanic Verses, do not form part of *ḥadīth* transmission at all,[4] and the argument has been made that exegetical and historical narratives are distinct from those treating of legal matters, unfortunately without broad assent.[5]

The point that although there are indeed formal and substantive connections between historical and *ḥadīth* narratives, they are nevertheless deployed to different purposes and therefore subject to different forms of patterning, is a crucial one and has been in circulation for a long time now.[6] Moreover, it has long been recognised that prophetic biography is quite distinct from exegesis.[7] Yet the scepticism of recent vintage has insisted that such biographies were essentially exegetical exercises,[8] without discriminating between genres or between the various components of biography; this exegetising motif has recently been extended to biographical materials emanating from the *ayyām*, and specifically, the biography of Imru' al-Qays, where material that might well be taken to be legendary is taken for a general description of all material that is extant.[9] Such discrimination would reveal that if an exegetical function in prophetic biography did in fact exist, it will have been confined largely to the *mubtada'*, narratives that related Muḥammad to earlier prophecy in the context of a salvation history.[10]

It has been suggested that, for Ibn Isḥāq, the exegetical and exemplary concerns of narration subordinated the historicity of his sources, including the Qur'ān, both conceptually and in terms of his narrative syntax, despite

3 Horovitz, "Alter und Ursprung," 40 ff.
4 Ahmed, *Satanic Verses*, 26 n. 45.
5 See the comments of Motzki, "Muṣannaf," 2 and Berg, *Development*, 50, 68 f.
6 Horovitz, "Alter und Ursprung," 39 f.
7 Nöldeke, "Tradition," 169.
8 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 230 ff.
9 Montgomery, "The Empty Ḥijāz," 60 ff., 65 n. 91.
10 'Alī, "Mawārid," 149; Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 27.

the highly nuanced view of this matter as proposed by Wansbrough in the distinction he makes between the parabolic and the exegetical.[11] That limited exegetical elements were enfolded into the *sīra* in successive redactions is not to be doubted, and is only to be expected.[12] Yet the *Sīra* does not include secondary, exegetical Qur'ānisation of Qur'ānic materials, and cannot, as claimed by some scholars, be said to have had a primarily exegetical and homiletic function,[13] and only secondarily a biographical and historical purpose. The tone of Ibn Hishām's edition of Ibn Isḥāq was clearly devotional, but its content was not altogether hagiographic,[14] and one might consider here certain similarities between such texts and the Gospels with regard to what has been described as the complementarity between factual credibility and the purposes of persuasion in the Gospels.[15] If one were to look for a genre of prophetic biography that had an exemplifying and epic purpose in essence rather than secondarily, over and above historical narration with an historical purpose, one would then need to turn to the much later, so-called legendary works of *maghāzī* and *futūḥ*, with public performance as their function, and containing much accretion of appropriate materials.[16]

It has already been suggested that tradition criticism in and by itself is not the sure way forward if one were to be concerned with veracity and verisimilitude. Excluding the concerns and contrivances of *a priori* scepticism, we still have a number of problems, concerned mostly not so much with contradiction, but with a certain lack of concordance among

11 Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 26 ff.; *idem*, *Quranic Studies*, 2, 38 ff., 122 ff.

12 Rubin, *Eye*, 226 ff.

13 Sinai, *Fortschreibung*, 51 n. 104.

14 Renan, *Études*, 176, 184.

15 Byrskog, *Story as History*, 223, and ch. 5, passim, for detailed elaboration.

16 Paret, *Maghāzī-Literatur*, 148 f., 151 ff.; *idem*, "Legendäre Futūḥ-Literatur," 736 ff., 744, 746 f., although these works do contain much historical material, made use of *isnād*, were related in determinate ways to historical biographies, and may well contain material that had been excised from earlier biographies, remaining, however, fettered by the form of historical writing from which they derive.

certain accounts, and evidence of the amalgamation of certain narratives relating to Paleo-Islam that is only to be expected given the histories of redaction overall, Arab and otherwise. Some examples will suffice to make this point. There is, in al-Azraqī's (d. 834) account of Mecca as in other such accounts, for instance, more than one interpretation of the city's early history,[17] based on various sources. There are different accounts of some details of Muḥammad's *hijra* in two categories of transmission, that of Wahb b. Munabbih (d. after 725) that seems to have remained marginal, and of the other, more central sources.[18] The legends of Muḥammad's Translation and Ascent (*isrā'* and *mi'rāj*) were clearly separate in origin, amalgamated and harmonised, with earliest evidence in Ibn Isḥāq, in different versions including narrative elements common to both.[19] More dramatically, a meticulously detailed attempt at reconstructing the history of historiographic reworking and reconstitution of one series of episodes – those of Muḥammad's relations with the Jews of Medina – revealed a possible account at variance with the standard narration of this matter,[20] but this instance would not necessarily bear generalisation.

Of course, none of this random sampling is unexpected. Even the last example cited bases reconstruction on the concordances and discordances that are available in a variety of narrative cores. And many a narrative core transmitted in Arabic literary sources across a wide range of themes and genres has external or otherwise concordant confirmation and probative sustenance, whose cumulative force tends to provide a *prima facie* case for the veracity of core narrative elements; the authenticity of clearly legendary elements conveys, in turn, an idea of collective representations.[21] Ultimately,

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17 Grabar, "Reading al-Azraqī," 3.

18 Kister, "Papyrus of Wahb," 564 ff.

19 Busse, "Jerusalem," 3 ff., 8, 9 ff.

20 Schöller, *Exegetisches Denken*.

21 Cf. Wickham, *Inheritance*, 13, on the use of epic materials in the writing of history, the assumption being that one does not take one's sources as literally as some historians of early Islam would like if they were to use them at all. Drama

as it has been suggested that tradition criticism alone cannot be regarded as the ultimate criterion of veracity, but remains auxiliary to considerations of plausibility, the latter must also be broached in terms of external confirmation to yield cumulative and compelling indices of veracity.

A brief consideration of certain types of materials that need to be used in reconstructing the histories of late antique Arabs, pagan as well as Paleo-Muslim, will help to clarify the points being made and open certain perspectives on the relevant genres and discursive domains. We might take accounts of pre-Muḥammadan Arab history and religion as a case in point, one that is particularly significant as it deals with a more opaque transmission over a longer period of time than accounts of Paleo-Islam, of which we have direct witness reflected in the literary sources discussed above and to be discussed further below. Already in the nineteenth century, Nöldeke had commented on the reliability of the work of Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 819), relating this to what epigraphic evidence was then available,[22] to which one might add the possibility of cross checking with other, independent sources. The author's antiquarian scrupulosity is confirmed by other scholars of the same period, confirming that this author had used documentary sources left behind at the court of al-Ḥīra as well,[23] and

was used skilfully and profitably as a source for Greek history from the middle of the nineteenth century at least (Nippel, *Droysen*, 308), and the major manual of positivist historiography discusses in detail the use of Sagas in historical writing, without a sense despair or of dread (Bernheim, *Lehrbuch*, 349 ff., 495 ff.).

22 Nöldeke, review of Wellhausen, *Reste*, 707 f. For the meticulous and careful nature and possible redactional histories of Ibn al-Kalbī's book on Arab paganism, see Preiṣler, "Arabische Götzen". On the possibilities and limits of epigraphic evidence for reconstructing pre-Islamic Arab history, see Macdonald, "Epigraphy and Ethnicity," 178 and Hoyland, "Content and Context." Hawting, *Idolatry*, 93 ff., makes a rather polemical case against the work of this antiquarian, on which polemic see the accommodating comment of Donner, Review of Hawting, *Idolatry*, 337 col. 2.

23 al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, 108 f.; TAB, 216; Olinder, *Kings of Kinda*, 16 f., 21 ff.; Rothstein, *Dynastie der Laḫmîden*, 50 ff., although this view has been contested ('Alī, *al-Mufaṣṣal*, 3:306).

sources held by descendants of persons involved in situations described.[24] The formal aspects of style marking his *Book of Idols* have the hallmarks of an archaic vintage for his material,[25] and its rather flat stylistic character places it at several removes from that of polemical purpose directed against a condition that, by his time, had become defunct,[26] it being kept in mind that tropes of monotheistic interpretations of idolatry are inevitable and readily detectable. Ibn al-Kalbī's details, in the opinion of a sceptical scholar, reflect historical fact "to some extent;" the divine names contained therein are not the product of exegesis but may have actually existed, and it would be unreasonable to suppose that the material was simply invented or that epigraphy has no corroborative force.[27] That some of the overarching themes concerning Ibn al-Kalbī's historiography and interpretation of polytheism bear comparison with the general monotheistic polemics against polytheism does not make it simply and entirely into a variant of this ancient polemic,[28] with no substance specific to it, nor does it, by virtue of its commitment to monotheism and contempt for polytheism, disqualify its source-historical value.

Moving to other types of accounts, also transmitted by narrative tradition, one might note that al-Ṭabarī's account of the last Roman-Sasanian war has been adjudged to be "an impressive performance," despite some indistinct details, some slight inaccuracies in chronology and some evident fictional touches.[29] Some elements in al-Ṭabarī's History, especially those regarding the Tanūkh migrations, are confirmed by epigraphic evidence.[30]

24 Hawting, *Idolatry*, 92.
25 Atallah, *Idoles*, LI f.
26 Stummer, "Bemerkungen," 393.
27 Hawting, *Idolatry*, 111 ff. The author (at 119 ff.) does refer, quite rightly, to the relative indeterminacy of cultic locations specified by Ibn al-Kalbī.
28 Hawting, *Idolatry*, 96 ff. – the connection had already been made by Stummer, "Bemerungen," 384 ff.
29 Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 366 ff.
30 Bowersock, "Bilingual Inscription," 521; *idem*, *Roman Arabia*, 132 f..

On a related issue, inscriptions indicate a certain Muʿāwiya b. Rabīʿat to have been King of Kinda ca. AD 220, and describe him as a descendant of one Thawr; five centuries later, Arab genealogists called early Kinda Thawr.[31] All this, and much more that could be cited, indicates that memories were particularly robust, indeed prodigious; prosopographic memory as registered in works of genealogy has been described as "stunning" by a scholar not given to credulity or enthusiasm.[32] Fanciful elements, including long South Arabian geneaologies, are readily detectable. Fragmentary as this corroboration may be, and it is likely to remain fragmentary, it does speak, not only for the inadmissibility of hyper-criticism against the purely oral model of transmission that will be discussed below, but for the cumulative compulsion of much of the narrative material we have. Quite apart from historical memories, there is a striking reliability of the contemporary record as well – silver coins from the Umayyad period suggest that the basic structure of the unfolding events as recorded in the literary sources is sound.[33]

The "consistent undervaluation of Arab sources" has been criticised, with reference to Ibn al-Kalbī and other sources for the pre-Islamic Arabs as well, in the course of reconstructing a chronology of sixth-century Arabia.[34] Arabic sources for the political history of pre-Muḥammadan Arabia overall, checked against others and against other types of evidence, have been adjudged to be quite reliable, certainly material relating to the late sixth century, and perhaps even as far back as the fourth.[35] Similarly, Arab narratives relating to north Arabia in the centuries preceding Muḥammad have clear marks of reliability on a variety of grounds,[36] including epigraphic corroboration of the kind cited above. A detailed study of accounts, narrative and chronological,

31 Robin, "Langues et écritures," 95.
32 Hoyland, "New Documentary Texts," 410, 410 n. 74.
33 Foss, "Unorthodox View," 753.
34 Smith, "Events," 429 f., 433, 463, 465 f.
35 Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 395 ff.
36 Retsö, *Arabs in Antiquity*, 466 ff.; Donner, "Bakr b. Wāʾil."

of *ḥurūb al-fijār*, the late sixth century series of engagements between Quraysh and Kināna on one side, and Qays ʿAylān in the other, has led to the conclusion, perhaps a little hyperbolically but not entirely inappropriately, that "sometimes the sources should be taken at their face value."[37]

Moreover, the narrative accounts of ʿUbayd (or ʿAbīd) b. Sharyah (d. 686) concerning Arabian, and particularly South Arabian history of the third and fourth centuries, receives epigraphic confirmation regarding toponyms and onomastics, and of narrative material as well.[38] ʿUbayd's work, and that of Wahb b. Munabbih, both of which contain much material that is manifestly legendary and mythological, and repay study on this account, are generally regarded as *akhbār* and *qaṣaṣ* rather than *tārīkh* (although the term *ḥadīth* was used for the former, used in a pre-technical sense),[39] and rarely used in modern historical writing given the pernickety positivism in place and the disinclination of medieval Arab scholars to use them. Both of these accounts work to glorify south Arabian polities; neither is Qur'ānising,[40] and that of ʿUbayd was dictated at the court of Muʿāwiya in Damascus

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37 Landau-Tasseron, "Sinful Wars," 56 and passim.

38 Crosby, *Akhbār al-Yaman*, 41, 49 f., 86, 100. See *ibid*., 93 ff. for the authenticity of text and of authorial attribution; 103 f. for ʿUbayd's own doubts concerning some narratives he related; 95 ff. for anachronisms in the extant text reflecting later interpolations; and 15 ff. for the historicity of this person, against popular prejudices in the Islamic studies profession. See also Abbott, *Studies*, 9 ff., and Khoury, "Kalif," 206 f. For an exemplary account of the possible uses and limits of epigraphic evidence in this kind of setting, using archaeological evidence and Linear-B documents to examine the possible historical content Greek epics, see Latacz, "Umfang und Art," who concludes that there remains an onomastic and topographical core, albeit repackaged beyond possible unpacking. In the case of Arabic narratives relevant to the sixth and fifth centuries, this situation can clearly be seen to be mitigated by the relatively short temporal distance and by greater ethnographic continuity that had not been subjected to deliberate literarisation and packaging before Paleo-Muslim times, and by the bare narrative character of the material transmitted.

39 Khoury, "Kalif," 209.

40 Abbott, *Studies*, 11 n. 5 indicated Qur'ānic references in Wahb's text that tends towards Biblicising.

during the period 660-663,[41] as part of the Umayyad antiquarianist cultural policy that shall be taken up below.

Yet both works contain a great amount of material retrievable for historical reconstruction,[42] and it may well be recalled that the generic distinctions between *tārīkh*, *akhbār*, *qaṣaṣ* and *ḥadīth* were later literary phenomena in which earlier transmitted material was crystallised in a variety of settings with varying purposes and genre-specific rules. Overall, a spurious distinction between serious history and works such as these, dubbed pseudo-historical or "volkstümliche Unterhaltungsliteratur,"[43] a view shared largely by Arabic historical writing, has militated against giving serious attention to that which is verifiably referential in them, all the while somewhat disregarding, in reaching overall judgement about the respectability of various types of sources, the legendary and other elements of affabulation in historical works deliberately composed within the genre of *tārīkh*.[44] In many instances, *akhbār* and *qaṣaṣ* deployed similar procedures for the confirmation or rejection of materials as are to be found in more canonical sources.[45]

Moreover, it might be remembered that the detection of fictitious elements, here as in other cases, such as the saga-like redaction of the career of Khālid b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qasrī (d. 743), does not imply falsification, and that embellishment as such is identifiable and of minor consequence overall.[46] The literary-generic distinction between *qaṣaṣ* and *ḥadīth* is

41 Khoury, "Kalif," 211, for the chronology.

42 One might compare the plea for the use of Christian apocalyptic materials relating to the rise of Islam, in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, ch. 8.

43 For instance, Fück, *Ibn Isḥâq*, 3.

44 See the comments of Hoyland, "History," 39.

45 For instance, citing the authority of Jubayr b. Muṭʿim in discussing a poem attributed to Adam: Wahb b. Munabbih, *al-Tījān*, 25, who cites a good number of other companions of Muḥammad's throughout, in a use of the *isnād* that has been adjudged to be competent (Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, 279).

46 Studied by Leder, "Features," who adds (at 74), unnecessarily in my view, that narrative patterning would nevertheless betoken falsification: it has already been suggested that the patterning of discrete narrative elements in a discursive

anachronistically applied to Wahb to explain the fact that he remained a marginal figure, and that only certain exiguous aspects of his work were kept in circulation. Yet the explanation for this must be seen to be of a different analytical order, having to do with the social and political geography of the formation and circulation of genres,[47] rather than in the institutional and social distinction between history and tale. Furthermore, later redactions of Wahb have proved convincingly valuable for the reconstruction of Persian activities in Arabia in the century preceding Muḥammad, problems of transmission notwithstanding, and on an assumption that their relative proximity to the events described mitigate certain misgivings associated with transmission.[48] It might be added that linguistic and orthographic features of some papyri attributed to Wahb share features with the earliest extant Arabic papyri, and might well be seen as conveying an idea of what the earliest accounts – those attributed to 'Urwa, for instance – might have actually looked like.[49] But we do not unfortunately have any studies of the stylistic, syntactic and lexical development of historical narratives in their successive redactions, studies which would contribute appreciably to the chronologies of transmission and the chronological layers any given reports may contain by inference from the physical evidence of language change.

Moving on to another theme of direct relevance which will be discussed again later, and allowance being made for the changing nature of genealogies,[50] it is clear that accounts in the literary sources of inter-clan divisions within the Quraysh, for instance, carry much more than simply reflections and rationalisations of later events.[51] The composition and

context does not necessarily lead to denying the veracity of these elements. More on this below.

47 Elements of this are indicated by Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, 276 ff., 280 f., 310 f.

48 Rubin, "Islamic Traditions," 191 and passim.

49 Cf. Khoury, "Papyruskunde," 266 f. and Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, 21 ff.

50 For the use of genealogical works for the reconstruction of Arabian history, see in general al-Dūrī, "Kutub al-ansāb."

51 Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 5; Szombáthy, *Genealogy*, 91.

recomposition of genealogies was as old as it was fractious, and in the Paleo-Muslim period, deliberately cultivated,[52] as it was thereafter until the ninth century when, like grammarians and lexicographers, genealogists sought to bring order to the proliferation of the vast materials then available and in circulation.[53] Genealogies do obey a "positional logic," reflecting relations obtaining at the moment of their announcement and composition. But this would apply primarily to their operational use in politics, which might be evanescent. Distant genealogies are generally characterised by an inertia that assures them much integral transmission of information appearing stilted and stiff; they also acquire stability when recast in a "scholastic" manner. This might be set in stone when genealogies act as legends or take on a mythical and mythographic function.[54]

The connection of distant genealogies with contemporary use, a matter than might endow them with operational salience and force,

52 *GAS*, 1:258 ff., on the reign of 'Umar I, and the cultivation of genealogies by Jubayr b. Muṭʿim, ʿAqīl b. Abī Ṭālib, Makhrama b. Nawfal and others. Earlier, the one genealogist mentioned whose life extended into early Paleo-Islam was al-Aqraʿ b. Ḥābis (al-Bayyātī, *Ayyām*, 1:32). The first elaborated, "published" work of geneaology might well have been that of the Separation of Maʿadd (by Muʿāwin b. ʿĀmira al-Kindī, who wrote ca. 692 (Caskel, *Ǧamharat an-Nasab*, 1:34) – but of course this discourse of "separation" is the highlight of genealogical contrivance obeying needs of neat and formulaic summary statements; Maʿadd, seem historically to have been an inchoate group referring generically to High Nomads of central Arabia (and ʿAdnān, supposedly the father of Maʿadd and of the northern Arabs, as an ethnonym seems to have been unknown before the seventh century), here given a consistency that is not historical: Zwettler, "Maʿadd," 224-226, 226 n. 5, and ʿAlī, *al-Mufaṣṣal*, 1:379-82. On tidying up the genealogies of Qaḥṭān, father of the southern Arabs, not attested before the latter part of the 7th. century, Caskel, *Ǧamharat an-Nasab*, 1:27 ff. On the genesis and development of classical Arab geneaologies, and on the genre-specific characteristics of these works, the fullest treatment to date is that of Szombáthy, *Genealogy*, 14, 20, 32, 42, 74 ff., 105 ff.126 ff., 141 ff.

53 This perceptive analogy was made by al-Ṣuwayyān, "al-Badāwa," 84.

54 A case for comparability with ancient Greece and with the Israelites can be made. See Speyer, "Genealogie," 1166 ff., 1202.

is betokened by their role in panegyrics, lampoons, and their public performance in *muʿāraḍa* and *mufākhara*,[55] to which might be added *al-munṣifāt*, which lend some of this material an air of factuality.[56] Moreover, the famous "fives", *al-khamsāt*, groups related back genealogically to five generations, is ubiquitously operative politically, economically and socially, as well as conveying a biological fact, and the group related to five generations was the one upon which blood-vengeance was incumbent generally in cases of homicide. The integrity of such five-generational lines can be tampered with only under very extraordinary circumstances.[57]

Genealogical literature does use tribes as an organisational and classificatory principle. But its detailed material speaks more for the fact that it was smaller lineages, rather than "tribes", that were the political actors on the ground, and that tribes were fissiparous and fractious groups which might, under particular political circumstances, cohere symbolically around the name of an eponymous ascendant, figuring as a symbol of political alliance.[58] The genealogically organised military register of the Umayyads (*dīwān al-muqātila*) did reflect political relations in Syria of its time, but such a matter needs to be scrutinised in detail rather than being taken for the ground for an indiscriminate blanket rejection of genealogical information. In all, robust memories, and the inertia of long-term genealogical lore, as well as the operational pertinence of live genealogies, tend together to lend credence to much of the material that has come down to us. Ibn al-Kalbī

55 See al-Bayyātī, *Ayyām*, 1:32 ff. One notes a striking similarity with ancient Greek encomiastic material: Speyer, "Genealogie," 1155 f. The *munṣifāt* of course betoken much more than a sportive spirit of fair play: they establish, ritually, necessary conditions of equivalence between contestants, including contestants in a vendetta. See Stetkevych, "The Rithā' of Ta'bbaṭa Sharran," 36 f.

56 Horovitz, "Die Poetischen Einlagen," 310 f.

57 On these, see especially al-Ṣuwayyān, "al-Badāwa," 82 f. Szombáthy, *Genealogy*, claims uncertainty is more evenly spread in classical geneaologies, and that the rule of 'fives' does not obtain there, but no reason or demonstration is offered.

58 See Donner, "Bakr b. Wā'il," 9 f., 11 f.; Saʿīd, *al-Nasab*, 179, 537 ff.

has already been mentioned with regard to his work on Arab paganism. One should also mention his vast work on genealogy,[59] which, when properly read, can yield surprising results for the historical reconstruction of late antique Ḥijāz,[60] and, by extension, the rest of Arabia.

Similarly, with regard to the related genre of sagas narrating Arab heroic lore, the *ayyām*,[61] a genre, like genealogy, vastly underused,[62] it is clear to a discerning historian that they bear a fairly clear consciousness of proximate collective identities, large and small. They do so in a manner capable of isolating events of importance and presenting them in chronological sequence, it being borne in mind that such chronologies are relative rather than absolute, although they might be correlated with external sources to produce a firmer chronological order in terms of the chronologies of Jafnids, Naṣrids and Ḥujrids/Kindites.[63] Genealogy itself, it must be added, "made it plain that the past was layered, and that there

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59 On the development of genealogical literature, see Caskel, *Ǧamhara*, 1:19 ff. On overall patterns and limitations, see Kennedy, "From Oral Tradition," 532 ff., 541 ff., and, more succinct albeit in shorter compass, Donner, "Bakr b. Wā'il," 8 ff.

60 Sa'īd, *al-Nasab*, 22 ff., 171.

61 For a general description, 'Alī, *al-Mufaṣṣal*, 5:344 ff. For the circulation and transmission of this material, Caskel, "Aijām," 82 ff., and al-Bayyātī, *Ayyām*, 1:15 ff., and 2:5 ff. on the work of the prime redactor, Abū 'Ubayda (d. 825). On the history of early composition and narration, see the considerations of Meyer, *Das historische Gehalt*, 2 ff., who proposes that this material is coeval with *jāhilī* poetry, and that it goes back to sixth century (a little too late, in my view), its material divided into two groups, Bakr/Tamīm in north-west Arabia/lower Mesopotamia, and Hudhayl north of the Ḥijāz and beyond.

62 The genre has not generally been sufficiently appreciated, its topographical detail and relevance to cultural history excepted: formally, it has not counted as historical writing in a genre-specific sense, and has often been sniffily relegated to "popular literature." On the early scholarly interest in this, Caskel, "Aijām," 5 ff. But it is used to good effect by Donner, "Bakr b. Wā'il," *passim*, who presents the reader with a very sober assessment of uses of this genre in the reconstruction of political history (pp. 14 f.). The corpus of *ayyām* and of genealogy is vast: *GAS*, 1, ch. II.A and II.B.

63 Meyer, *Das historische Gehalt*, 8.

were links between the layers."[64] The *ayyām* corpus is of course, technically, not historical writing but rather epic in its nature.[65] This does not mean that it yields no material over and above indications of an Arab epic spirit.[66] Despite its limitations of form and content, it refers to specific actions, personalities, and locations, sometimes scrambled or conflated; and despite its exaggerations, anachronisms, implausibilities, and contradictions, it does allow for the reconstruction of historical events relative to the history of Arabia.[67] This is not least the case as it displays an extraordinary consistency of content, a scrupulous transmission of component core narratives,[68] and archaic linguistic and cultural content.

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64 Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 364. On problems arising from the use genealogical literature, Donner, "Bakr b. Wā'il," 13 f.

65 Gabrieli, "Elementi," 752; Meyer, *Das historische Gehalt*, 5. This would apply to the corpus collectively; individual components do not normally relate deeds of heroes construed according to the pathetic ideal of a hero: Caskel, "Aijām," 23 ff.

66 Caskel, "Aijām," 8, 54 ff., 23.

67 Some of these matters are well brought out by Montgomery, *Vagaries*, 23 ff., with reference to Ibn al-Athīr's account of the death of al-Mundhir b. Mā' al-Samā'. See Meyer, *Das historische Gehalt*, 7, 9 ff., and 47 ff., where a number of *ayyām* are reconstructed (Yawm al-Raḥraḥān, Yawm Shi'b Jabala, and the famous war of Dāḥis wa'l-Ghabrā'). Yawm al-Raḥraḥān was inserted into the saga of al-Ḥārith b. Ẓālim (on whom see especially *AGH*, 11:65 ff.), as well brought out in the historisation of this person by Meyer, *Das historische Gehalt*, 42. Unsurprisingly, al-Ḥārith was identified not only as a hero but also as a narrator of *ayyām* in favour at the court of al-Ḥīra, where his narratives were recorded (al-Bayyātī, *Ayyām*, 1:36, 36 n. 5). Caskel, "Aijām," 75 ff., 86 ff., had already signalled a number of features, such as the use of large-scale tribal names rather than those of operative small-scale clans, the romanticisation of motifs that had originally been curtly realistic, substitution of names and locations, parallel traditions of the same episode, differing sequences of events in different redactions, all in the context of the thesis that the genre had been subject to a process of narrative framing over the generations, after the time of Abū 'Ubayda, leading ultimately to a harmonisation and finally to the generation of the popular epic cycle *Sīrat 'Antara*.

68 Meyer, *Das historische Gehalt*, 5 f.

More recently, a much more general case for overall veracity of Arabic narratives and chronologies contained in the literary sources, confirmed by epigraphic and external Greek, Armenian and other sources, has been made forcefully.[69] These sources, many based for their core elements on materials transmitted from the Arabs, preserve very early versions of what appears in Arabic literary sources, and record material, especially certain government decrees, that had fallen out of the Arabic literary tradition or had not been included in what remains extant of it.[70] It is particularly unfortunate that the work of Ibn al-Kalbī on the "anti-prophet" Masaylima b. Ḥabīb appears no longer to be extant, and does not appear to have been cited by later authors, as it would have contained much important information of this type.[71] Some of these literary sources confirm accounts of the early conquests, of the First Civil War, or the caliphate of Muʿāwiya.[72] They allow not only for a confirmation of what Arab sources bring, but also the reconstruction of certain events the Arabic accounts of which appear to be uncertain, such as the conquest of Egypt,[73] or the course and chronology of the capture of Jerusalem.[74]

In other words, these non-Arabic sources tend to corroborate the events related in the Arabic sources, when such corroboration is needed,

69 For an integrated consideration of what these external sources provide and how they might be used, see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, ch. 13. The salience of these works had already been pointed out by Morony, "Sources," 20 ff. See also Robin, "Royaume Hujride," 671 f., 674 ff., and Gajda, "Ḥuğr b. ʿAmr," for a particular fifth-century history.

70 Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 592, 592 n. 3, 596.

71 Makin, *Representing the Enemy*, 3 f.

72 Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 366, 372 ff. passim.

73 Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 574-90. But these sources do not in themselves allow the construction of a coherent picture of Paleo-Muslim history, let alone supporting an alternative version or counter-history: *ibid*., 598.

74 Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 380 ff. See also the reconstruction of the conquest of Syria in its various phases, and of Iraq, despite the multiplicity of accounts and the uncertainties of chronology, by Donner, *Conquests*, 111-155 and 173-220.

to provide preponderant plausibility in case of uncertainty, thereby acting as do other, non-literary sources. Of the latter, special mention is merited by the use of physical evidence, most recently in the study of the Arabian economy and of Meccan trade on the eve of Paleo-Islam, using literary sources, physical evidence (of mining, for instance), and of course the resources of economic theory.[75] Last but by no means least, the physical evidence of extant manuscripts appears to be in remarkable agreement with the literary transmission of Qur'ānic readings.[76] In all, we have a situation where Arabic narratives are confirmed in a number of crucial instances that, together, yield a reasonable presumption of overall veracity.

75 Thus contra the use of "negative evidence documentation" in dealing with this topic: Heck, "Arabia without Spices", 547 ff., 558 ff.

76 Sadeghi and Bergmann, "The Codex of a Companion," 379 ff.

4

Genres, Authors and Antiquarians Revisited: the Snares of Narrative

The foregoing considerations would now allow us again to take a fresh look at questions of transmission and related issues that have already been brought up. Much of the historical and pseudo-historical material assembled in the narrative sources – and under consideration, here as above, is the whole repertoire, not restricted to material of a religious resonance generally favoured in scholarship - arose ultimately from various forms of accumulation, tantamount in some way to "collective composition," an accumulation of materials later registered en masse into vast works such as the *History* of al-Ṭabarī.[1] Such are by no means unusual or bizarre in the history of texts, where a textual koiné such as the Homeric texts at various stages of canonisation, or uncorrected versions of Jerome's Vulgate are considered authoritative, leaving room for correction as restoration (*diorthōsis*), the process officiated by reading out for the purposes of checking

1 Leder, "Khabar," 280 f., 306, 314, and cf. van Ess, *Fehltritt*, 387. Of course, the repertoire of historical narratives on the period of interest in this book is not confined to these sources.

and cross-checking (*paranagignōskein*).[2] This is of course quite different to the notion of an accomplished text as it came to be understood after the Reformation, and one needs to guard against anachronistic expectations.

It will be clear from the foregoing that, for the writing of history in the manner being developed in the book to which this essay is a companion, it is not of special consequence to occupy oneself obsessively with whether al-Wāqidī, for instance, attributed to himself the work of others, not least Ibn Isḥāq.[3] The latter had some one hundred transmitters and redactors, according to the latest tally,[4] and his work, based on earlier material, is one locus where a number of traditions transmitted were gathered, and made their way to al-Wāqidī, directly, through various redactions, or together with early material that was no longer in wide circulation.[5] Nor would it matter enormously to note that Ibn Isḥāq, like al-Zuhrī before him, repeatedly revised his work, and that what he might have left might only have been

2 Nagy, *Homer*, 67 ff., 59, 64 ff.

3 Horovitz, "Earliest Biographies," (1928), 518; Schoeler, *Charakter*, 25. It is more likely that the two authors used independent and concordant sources: Jones, "Chronology," 51 and *passim*; al-Sallūmī, *al-Wāqidī*, 1:176 ff. Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 224 f., makes a similar point.

4 al-Ṭarābīshī, *Ruwāt*, 49 f., studied transmissions from Ibn Isḥāq in great detail and organised the lines of transmission into branches encompassing several hundred redactions (ch. 2), some self-contained and free-standing while many others incorporated into other works – the figure of 100 redactors is revised up from 61 identified in the same author's "Ruwāt al-Maghāzī," published 13 years earlier. In 1925, Fück, *Ibn Isḥâq*, 44, had recorded 15 transmitters, and had already noted (at 35) that Ibn Hishām had indicated clearly and scrupulously the changes he had introduced in Ibn Isḥāq, and the type of material he had chosen to discard (*SIH*, 1:4).

5 One might cite the work of Maʿmar b. Rashīd (d. 770), preserved in papyrus, containing themes and phraseology close to those of al-Wāqidī when drawing on Ibn Isḥāq, Maʿmar's contemporary: Abbott, *Studies*, 74 ff., text at 65-7, commentary at 71 ff. Jones, "Chronology," 51, explores the relations between al-Wāqidī, Ibn Isḥāq and Mūsā b. ʿUqba and suggests a base text formalised earlier. *GAS*, 1:758, provides detail of *maghāzī* works during the Umayyad period.

a fluid textual corpus[6] -- unless, of course, one were to rest content with stopping their research at this point, and to draw premature conclusions on the assumption that redaction and revision necessarily implied disfiguration.

This kind of investigation can be of some limited interest in itself, but it does not help much with reconstructing the history of the period of concern if left to itself, and tends to reflect less definable historical concerns than the runaway internal dynamic of tradition criticism. The attribution of a work to a transmitter rather than to the primary author was not uncommon,[7] and forms part of a broader phenomenon that also includes the collective *isnād*. It invites the question of how the relation between author, redactor and compiler, and between a particular redaction and smallest literary unit might be construed[8] – or, one would rather say, to the smallest unit of content on which historical narrative and analysis needs to be based, without begging the question of the recoverability of the earliest literary units when regarded as units of content. After all, authorship and textual stability are determinate institutional and legal conceptions, whose fluidity in the Paleo-Muslim and early Muslim times is manifest, leading some scholars to regard the search for definitive authorship to be meaningless,[9] while the more realistic view would be to regard transmission and authorship to constitute a continuum,[10] whose hinge, for our purposes, is the single report and the single element of content.

6 al-Ṭarābīshī, *Ruwāt*, 45.

7 Azmi, *Early Hadith*, 205 ff.

8 Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 35 f. Leder, *Korpus*, 5, brings out the distinction between single textual elements and the work into which they are compiled and framed, and Hoyland, "History," 26 f., discusses elements of the historiographic character of such elements. In more systematic scope, Günther, "Assessing the Sources," differentiates usefully a number of important operational categories of texts transmitted and their transmitters.

9 Leder, "Authorship," 71 ff.; more concretely: Hilali, "Coran, Hadith."

10 Hoyland, "History," 40.

The embellishments and even the inventiveness of transmitters of tradition, unlike poets or novelists, were constrained by a strong sense of verisimilitude as they rewrote material received. Ultimately, no discoverable document is entirely protected from its textual nature.[11] As a result, work with literary sources needs to be ever attentive to the "quirkiness of texts," in an attitude of mistrust to which is brought to bear the experience of consequent reading, beyond the wild hares of final authorial intention,[12] and of course beyond taking this indeterminacy to be the occasion for opting out altogether of considering the veracity of events recorded.

Inevitably, later narrations, in contrast to the core content related by a ʿUrwa, for instance, are highly stylised, patterned by genre-specific narrative requirements, salvation-historical, legendary, epic, mythical and other topoi and motifs. We have access only to few texts with unmistakably archaic tonality, vocabulary, syntax, and overall spirit,[13] such as many of the pre-Islamic *ayyām* preserved, along with sometimes elaborate lines of authentication, in the vast *Book of Songs* of al-Aṣbahanī (d. 967),[14] in the *Maghāzī* of Wahb b. Munabbih, as suggested, or, indeed, in the repertoire of ancient Arabic poetry discussed below. There is much hyperbole overall, but this, like the other features mentioned, are only to be expected, being less technical defects that debar historical consideration than constituent discursive features. If the early transmission history of the *ayyām* is in some ways opaque, this body of literature is still an invaluable source for all

11 Spiegel, "History, Historicism," 76.

12 Greetham, *Textual Scholarship*, 296, 316, 341.

13 Cf. the comments on the Homeric epics by Finley, *Odysseus*, 26.

14 On the sources for which see Fleischhammer, *Quellen*, 20 ff. and passim; on al-Aṣbahanī's use and collation of his sources, *GAS*, 1:378-80. Of the thematic material treated in his Book of Songs, some 12 per cent is pre-Islamic, 15 per cent pre- and Paleo-Muslim (*mukhaḍram*), 40 per cent Umayyad (Fleischhammer, *Quellen*, 13). See also Kilpatrick, *Book of Songs*, 94 ff., 111 ff., who also reminds us (at 1) that nineteenth century attention to this book on the part of international scholarship was motivated primarily by interest in pre-Islamic matters.

manner of detail, chronological, onomastic, topographical and much more, and an excellent source for ethnography and cultural history.[15]

Early Arabic poetry, on whose composition and transmission some comments will be made below, performs a similar function for the historian,[16] and is a veritable mine of Arabian toponymy and topography, often further clarified by later commentators.[17] Its prosody has been regarded as of documentary value for the manner of its original recitation,[18] and by extension for matters of concern to the history of Arabic. And although the foregoing discussion has concentrated more on the transmission of material through the genres of *sīra*, *maghāzī*, exegesis and *ḥadīth* formally so-called in retrospect, one might well need to review these generic designations, by seeing *maghāzī*, for instance, as belonging generically to the *ayyām* genre.[19]

15 Caskel, "Einheimische Quellen," 332 ff.; ʻAlī, *al-Mufaṣṣal*, 5:341 ff.

16 Wellhausen, "Alte arabische Poesie," 593, 598. This perspicuous article, virtually never cited, provides a good introduction to ancient Arabic poetry. For a similar view, see Renan, *Histoire générale*, 354 (with caveats). Among others, Izutsu (*God and Man*) uses poetry most usefully for reading the Qur'ān, as did Muslim exegetes. See the comments of Johansen, "Politics and Scholarship," 82, for a not altogether positive discussion of the role of poetry in nineteenth-century German philological scholarship.

17 Thilo, *Ortsnamen*, 9 ff. Scholarship has used these extensively; one scholar sees this attention to be part of a "rhetoric of devaluation," which sees little in Arabic poetry but descriptions of geology and anatomy (Sells, "Qaṣīda," 308 f.). Stetkevych, *Zephyrs*, 107, maintains that toponyms in *nasīb* may have been only "evocative moorings," which they certainly were, but this does not disqualify the concreteness of indication, which, as noted in *ibid*., 110, was to become a lexical and philological concern to medieval Arabic scholars. As Montgomery noted sanguinely ("The Empty Ḥijāz," 43), poetry is "as fundamental to a fully contextualised understanding of Islamic origins as are vociferously promoted forms of Late Antique monotheism or intonations of Revelation as miracle."

18 "Arūḍ," *EI*, 1:675b.

19 Horovitz, "Alter und Ursprung," 39; *idem*., "Poetischen Einlagen," 311. Affinities between *ayyām* and prophetic *sīra* are brought out by Caskel, "Aijām," 49, 54, 85 and passim. See the reflections of Cheddadi, *Les Arabes et l'appropriation de l'histoire*, 84.

The *Maghāzī* of Wahb b. Munabbih which, as has been suggested, preserves a very early linguistic register and might provide a vivid impression of what the earliest accounts may have looked like, is in many determinate respects an *ayyām* work, with its bare narrative and, duly Islamised, in the heroic image it projects of ʻAlī b. Abī Ṭālib.[20]

A view such as the one for which an argument is being made should make room for a broader category of early *akhbār* which would include material later gathered by broadly similar mechanisms of collection and transmission by the antiquarians of the Umayyad court, and by later antiquarianism under ʻAbbāsid patronage.[21] The collection and redactions of *akhbār*, generically understood to encompass genealogies, political and other events later become *maghāzī* and *siyar* (particularly al-Zuhrī),[22] *ayyām*, prophetic biography (ʻUrwa b. al-Zubayr, for instance), tribal and regional narratives (ʻUbayd b. Sharya, for instance), *qaṣaṣ*, and Biblical stories (Wahb b. Munabbih, Kaʻb al-Aḥbār who died in 652 or 654, Ibn Sallām, d. 663); the collection of poetry grouped by individual authors or as tribal corpora (including the first Book of Songs by Yūnus al-Kātib, d. 742), genealogy, proverbs, and early philology (especially Abū'l-Aswad al-Du'alī, d. 688-9):[23] all this bespeaks a deliberate antiquarianist effort by the Umayyads, an

20 Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, PB 18:47, PB 19:48, PB 20:49.

21 For a preliminary overview of the ʻAbbāsid setting, see Drory, "Construction of the Jahiliyya." This is a matter that calls for detailed research, and it has already been suggested that a comparison with Roman antiquarianism of the Augustan Age would be appropriate and fruitful.

22 It had been suggested by Goldziher (letter to Nöldeke, 21 June, 1896: Simon, *Goldziher*, # 16) that the Pahlavi *Karnāmak* may have been the model for *maghāzī* and *siyar*, reflected in Arabic accounts of Ardashīr – for instance, al-Masʻūdī, *al-Tanbīh*, 196. The point is worthy of consideration, especially given the milieu of al-Ḥīra, and bearing in mind that this Pahlavi material is extant only through its Arabic transmission. See Rypka, *History*, 45 f., 55 ff.

23 Fück, *Ibn Isḥâq*, 3 f.; *GAS*, 1:245, 258, 304 ff.; Mackensen, "Arabic Books" (1936-37), 241 ff.; *ibid*. (1937), 42 ff.; Beeston, "Appendix," 113; Khoury, "Kalif," 215, 217 f.

integrated interest in the pre-Islamic Arab past on their part to which we shall return below, fixed in writing.[24]

This was a propensity, and indeed an Umayyad cultural programme that was not only antiquarian but also archaising, especially in poetry, which sought to perfect and amplify the pre-Islamic poetical descriptions of the desert, its animals, its sentiments, its climate, its linguistic and lexical archaisms, and deployed material from geneaology and *ayyām* plentifully in a spirit of nostalgia and of restoration from a distance that allowed for the deliberate technical elaboration of its imagery.[25] This has been described by one scholar as a "jāhili fundamentalism," with poets putting themselves forward – in their language, imagery, and sentiment – as more *jāhilī* than the *Jāhilī*s themselves.[26] But this antiquarian effort also required the collection and organisation of antiquarian knowledge, a matter connected to the greater incidence of writing and the regular physical storage of information. Although al-Walīd b. ʿAbd al-Malik is the first among the Umayyads who is reported to have employed a librarian, one Ziyād al-Maṣāḥifī, a *mawla* and student of Ibn ʿAbbās, the possibility that Muʿāwiya had maintained a book depository should not be discounted,[27] and tallies with his promotion of collecting – and hence storing -- poetical and other material. This is a matter to be discussed further below, as the thesis of orality is taken up against a background of a wide assumption of perfunctory writing during this period and of a sudden transition from aurality to reading in the ninth century.[28] In anticipation of this, it might be pointed out at this stage that evidence indicates that, by the reign of Hishām (r. 724-43), there may have been a standardised caliphal chronology,[29] and that an examination

24 Fück, *Ibn Isḥâq*, 2 f., 3 ff. n. 10-14.

25 Rūmiyya, *al-Qaṣīda*, 349 ff., 389 ff., 498 ff.

26 Rūmiyya, *al-Qaṣīda*, 337, 436.

27 Eche, *Bibliothèques*, 11-13, 18.

28 Fück, *Ibn Isḥâq*, 6; Schoeler, *Genesis*, 120.

29 Humphreys, *Muʿawiya*, 13.

of variants of Umayyad succession documents reflects a definite, standard Marwānid chancery practice.[30]

Perhaps more elaborate was ʿAbbāsid antiquarianism, which built upon, amplified, and differentiated generically in a better crystallised way the efforts of their imperial predecessors. Ibn al-Kalbī has already been mentioned more than once. There is much by way of Arab antiquities in al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 869) and other ʿAbbāsid literati, and of course much in the work of Ibn Qutayba (d. 889) who, in his work on Arab meteorology and ethno-astronomy, for instance, is conscious of the need to disengage this ancient lore from later philosophical and mathematical elaboration undertaken in terms of the scientific knowledge of a later age.[31] Finally, one very important element in this antiquarianism is linguistic science, most saliently lexicography and especially etymology, and of course the study of poetry, its collection and edition, and its scholiastic, ethnological, historical and etymological explication. All this material needs to be used in reconstructing the history of late antique Arabs before and after Muḥammad, and needs to be explicitly assessed in the process.

Ibn Qutayba had perhaps not been careful enough in avoiding anachronism. This brings us to the question of the discursive patterning of narratives and of the interpolation of narrative elements. The first thing that needs to be said in this regard is that it is difficult to find historical narratives without discursive patterning, or even short and bare testimonials and reports without a discursive structure which might be uncovered by consideration of criteria of relevance and omission. This distinction between the narrative and discursive moment would hold even when it is admitted that topoi often form part of the very first telling of an event.[32] In all events, it cannot be

30 Marsham, *Rituals*, 146 ff. It is little wonder, therefore, that an exhaustive and meticulous examination of the transmission of epistles attributed to ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd b. Yaḥyā al-Kātib, transmitted in multiple versions, yields no serious challenge to their integrity and authenticity: Al-Qāḍī, "State Letters," 224 ff.

31 Ibn Qutayba, *al-Anwāʾ*, § 2.

32 Schoeler, *Charakter*, 163 f.

seriously maintained that verisimilitude is merely a function of narrative structure – what I would call its discursive moment - and of its creation of a realistic charade,[33] not least as there are other criteria of credibility, including criteria of inherent implausibility and of the dating of layers of traditions.[34] That realism is a narrative convention might be conceded, provided that this is not taken to imply necessarily that it is nothing but conventional.

One might disregard the obvious consequences of patterned stories relating the same events attributed to two different persons,[35] and one might well note the telescoping of events and sequences of events, already noted by Wellhausen,[36] the tendency to see past events proleptically and later events analeptically, the tendency to use events and personalities as exemplary instances in an apophthegmatic sense.[37] Overall, we know well that Arabic narrative sources are emplotted, that they deploy narrative strategies, deploy stereotypical personality types and literary forms,[38] in the manner usual in all narratives. It would be unreasonably to think otherwise, to regard this as a technical failing, or discount it on this ground.

All this is very interesting, both in itself and in its implications for the assessment of materials pertinent to the task of historical reconstruction

33 Leder, "Literary Use of Khabar," 307.

34 For instance, the elaborate study of the composite forms of narratives purporting to relate Heraclius' recognition of Muḥammad studied by Leder, "Heraklios," *passim*. Such a treatment would apply to narratives both fictive and otherwise, and need not be taken to imply fiction (S. Leder, private communication) – but cf. *ibid*., 3.

35 For instance, *AGH*, 11:20 f., 26, 27.

36 Noth, *Historical Tradition*, 47 ff., 54 f., 58.

37 This last corresponds to the *chreia* of Hellenistic rhetoric and education, relating anecdotes to illustrate more general positions – the homology between this and elements of Muslim *ḥadith*, already discerned by von Harnack, has been well albeit fragmentarily brought out by Speight, "Rhetorical Argumentation," 76 f. and passim. See Mack and Robbins, *Patterns of Persuasion*, 1 ff.

38 The state of the field is discussed with exemplary clarity by Hoyland, "History," 25-32.

and interpretation. The last matter, interpretation, would depend crucially on what Frye characterised as 'incomplete reading:' reading with an eye to what for Frye's purposes was the lexical moment of meaning, which he called centrifugal, and which he complemented with the centripetal moment of the discursive aspect of meaning.[39] For the purposes of the historian, the discursive or centripetal moment of Arabic (and other) historical traditions does not necessitate the contention that the content of an historical report, Frye's lexical moment, is itself a mere hypothesis.[40] Statements such as this tend to overdraw, in rather summary manner, certain barely assimilated trends within post-structuralist narratology, and emplot them into a sceptical context.[41]

It is as if, in the name of a conceptual *aggiornamento* of the field of Islamic studies, whose conceptual elaboration is comparatively sparse, there is an attempted appropriation of theoretical postures by importing into historiography literary theories designed to account for narrative features of the modern novel.[42] In this move from a tradition of positivism directly into post-structuralism, the hyper-critical temper appears as a godsend, underwriting in positivistic terms what post-structuralism is supposed to have known all along – that language is generative rather than mimetic, that the sign (here: the text) has no materiality of reference, that history and society are texts, with deleterious consequences for the understanding not only of history, but also of the history of texts.[43]

One might add that such exclusive insistence on the expectedly and undeniably narrative character of Arabic historical writings is, in the scholarship at hand, at times conceived as little more than an auxiliary aid

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39 Frye, *Anatomy*, 58; failure to grasp the centripetal moment counts as "incompetent reading."

40 Schoeler, *Charakter*, 166.

41 For the sake of clarity, I would refer here especially to Megill, "Grand narrative," and Munz, "Historical narrative," 171-3.

42 Stempel, "Erzählung", § 3.1.

43 Spiegel, "History, Historicism," 61 f., 68 f.

for hyper-critical arguments from tradition criticism, except in so far as some studies cited try to disengage the discursive structure of some texts, as embodied, for instance, in the thematic structure of the *sīra*, rather than be concerned with studying the structures of narrative, with the overall restricted purpose of adding post-structuralist sophistication to the underlying positivistic argument of hyperscepticism. In effect, hiding behind "theory", or taking it broadly as a set of keywords and sentiments, at the thin edge, amounts to circumventing proper research questions.

5

Fact, Fiction and Narrative Patterns: Ways of Reading

There are certainly ways of reading literary sources through the discursive patterning of narrative, and this is well demonstrated in historical scholarship overall, to which the writing of the history of the Arabs should not be taken as an exception. Stylisation is of course undeniable and inevitable, and Arabic sources are patterned according to a variety of ways, depending on the generic specificity of the source in question, ways which in themselves are rough indicators of the relationship between text and what it purports to relate. This is a relationship which has a history that reaches beyond that of the text's transmission. Despite the fairly common currency of narrativist keywords, there is precious little study of the generic properties of Arabic historical narratives which might help to navigate them with view to writing history. Legend is readily recognisable even when it does not betray itself by the miraculous, among other things and quite apart from the obvious, by the repetition of standard motifs of extremely wide, even universal incidence, and by the relative neglect of factors of time and space which, however, can be filled in the process of composition and elaboration

aiming at a clear progress of plot.[1] Much the same might be said of myth, which shares structural and motifemic elements with legend, but which refers specifically to elements of the sacred.

That the biography of Muḥammad, and the history of Paleo-Islam more generally, contains legendary and mythical elements is of course evident. These detailed legendary and mythical components are distinguishable from other generic properties, and, like pseudo-historical accounts in the Old Testament, are intermixed with historical reportage and interpretative historical theology.[2] Details of Muḥammad's biography recorded in the early *akhbār* and *qaṣaṣ* were later inserted into the overall discursive structures of prophetic biography overall: the themes of withdrawal into the wilderness, call to prophecy, persecution, appeasement, triumph – in such a way that commonplace and attestable events were related as rites of passage within the overall narrative scheme,[3] in a manner structurally comparable to that of other prophetic biographies, to hagiographies, and to heroic tales. Muḥammad was, after all, both Apostle of God and hero, the latter aspect of which is not noted often enough or consequentially enough.[4] Indeed, the overarching discursive structure of Muḥammad's prophecy, compared

1 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 19. Narratives of conversion, very pertinent to the history of seventh-century Arabs, lend themselves most perfectly to legend: "Bekehrung," *EM*.

2 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 21.

3 Rubin, *Eye of the Beholder*, 103 ff., 217 ff.

4 The term hero is used in the technical sense designating a character who figures as eponymous founder (like Muḥammad or Quṣayy, Abraham, Moses, and Jacob/Israel, Jesus, Romulus and Augustus) or as exemplary (like Muḥammad, Siegfried, Perseus, Hercules or Alexander, or various figures in the *ayyām* and sagas and myths in other languages), or both, and is memorialised as such in literature broadly conceived (including historical discourse) or the plastic arts. Narrative accounts of heroes are often set along standard motifemic patterns in a fairly standard narrative sequence, similar to those deployed in folk-tales, as identified in a number of studies. See Lord Raglan, "The Hero," 138, 139 ff., narratologically valuable and ambitious despite its rather dogmatic Frazerianism,

to that of Abraham, in general as well as in detail, can be taken for a myth of foundation involving the creation of order out of chaos.[5]

But again, the likelihood is that Biblical themes and motifs were adapted to fit the basic facts of Muḥammad's biography and the discursive structure of generically similar narratives, without the inventive concoction of episodes;[6] manifestly legendary and mythical elements need not in themselves be concocted or grafted by the authors of these later texts but have early origins, including the Qur'ān.[7] The tendentious shaping of narrative elements by means of motifemic sequences, set pieces (including dialogues), improbable or anachronistic normative settings, myths and legends, new or already in place, are clearly separable from the elements so shaped.[8]

To these must be added elements with strong generic affinities to the epic, or rather, as the works under consideration are mostly in prose, to the saga.[9]

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and, for a most useful overview, Dundes, "Hero Pattern,"180 ff., with reference to folk-tale motifs (Aarne-Thompson types 300-749) at 186.

5 This point is very well and thoroughly argued, in comparative perspective, by al-Saʿfī, *al-Qurbān*, 68 ff., 91 ff., 172 ff.

6 This sensible point has been made by Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 406.

7 Sinai, *Fortschreibung*, 245 ff., investigates sinuously the interweaving of Qur'ānic "spolia" (the coinage is that of Neuwirth, "Sacred Mosque," 399) and of other legendary material in the making of exegetical and biographical materials about Muḥammad, a perspective that could be expanded to other bodies of Paleo-Muslim narrative material.

8 Cf. Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, xiii f.

9 The formal features of epic are very well described by Olrik, "Epic," 132 ff. On epics and sagas, Jolles, *Einfache Formen*, 69, from a rather limited comparative perspective (Germanic and classical) considered and considerably broadened by Foley, "Epic as Genre," 180 and passim. There are a number of extraordinarily suggestive formal and other comparisons to be made between Nordic sagas and the *ayyām*, which is unsurprising given certain comparable ethnographic and natural conditions: a complex social and micro-social geography, kin structures, an ethos of martial honour, precarious ecologies leading to trade and raiding both inside and outside, across inhospitable expanses of featureless waters for the one, and rocky or sandy (but keenly known) terrain for the other, under

This would apply particularly to the *ayyām*,[10] broadly understood, as indicated above, to include *maghāzī* and other materials. This is a genre composed of narrative, being the account of a series of actions in temporal sequence, cast in the heroic mode, relating individual and, auxiliarily, ancestral deeds, and is, like the sagas, organised around a number of thematic actors figuring as narrative vectors: exceptional men (rarely women), family, tribe, and blood-relation. It also shares with the saga a number of linguistic and formal features.[11] Chief among these features is a relatively sparse, terse, and brisk reportage-like diction holding close to a major story-line, with only sparing

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conditions of extreme climates. This matter was noted by McDonald, "Orally Transmitted Poetry," 30, who suggest (at 15, 17 ff., 25 ff.) comparisons between early Arabic poetry and Nordic, Irish, and Celtic poetic output. The matter has not, unfortunately, attracted any deliberate attention to date.

10 One might include here the *Akhbār* of ʿUbayd b. Sharyah (Crosby, *Akhbār al-Yaman*, 105).

11 The connections between prose and poetry in both bodies of literature are a case in point for the suggestive comparisons just mentioned – see Porter, "Skaldic Poetry," 1 ff. Weak emplotment, and the bare narrative, are features evident in the *ayyām* and shared by saga material composed in verse as well, as in the earliest extant Germanic text, the Hildebrandslied; the (short) text, with an English translation, is available at http://hub.hu.berlin.de/~hab/arnd/text.html. Its only embellishment is the use of alliteration, which was the main embellishment of Nordic poetry as well, a limited artfulness using the natural resource of first-syllable stress in the Germanic languages accompanying the *Lautverschiebung*. See "Hildebrand und Hildebrandslied", *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, 14:554-561. A comparison in these terms has already been made by McDonald, "Orally Transmitted Poetry," 27, 29 (here with Welsh poetry). Nöldeke, "Tradition," 166 n., 1, had already compared Arabic poetry favourably with that of the Germanic peoples, for all his distaste for the former. Discussion available on the use of poetry in the biography of Muḥammad, for instance (constituting one-fifth of Ibn Isḥāq's work), are still at an elementary stage (see, for example, Horovitz, "Earliest Biographies" (1928), 180 f.; idem, "Poetischen Einlagen," 309 and 311, where there is mention of verses transferred from *ayyām* to *sīra*; Sellheim, "Prophet," 47). Somewhat more elaborated is the account of Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 1, 33, where the connection with *ayyām* poetry is also brought up.

use of similes; weak emplotment, relating a number of narrative functions or motif elements performed by particular characters,[12] usually heroic; occasional digressions, auxiliary narratives, and occasional flashbacks.[13]

Historical material is variously configured in these various genres,[14] and the effects upon this incorporation by the possibly oral medium of primary transmission, or its mimetic reproduction, will be discussed below. All that needs to be said here is that although the *ayyām* narratives, in the usual manner of literature now classified as oral, are not attributed to any particular author, whereas the *maghāzī* have a definite orientation towards authorship, or at least the attribution of definite authorship, it remains the case that the two genres display decided formal concordances. What might be concluded from this is not that the *maghāzī* preserved features of orality, and must consequently be subjected to the same doubts about veracity that are normally cast upon oral composition and transmission. They are not oral texts, and they do display an accent on accuracy and verification, as then understood, and have the air of the memorialising reportage and the memorandum. What might be concluded, rather, is an invitation to consider the question of orality and writing in a sense richer and more realistic than is afforded by looking at them as a contrastive hierarchical pair in which the oral is a lower variant.[15]

12 Propp, *Morphology*, 20 f., where the function is defined as "an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of action." The narrative morphology of the *ayyām* has not been the subject of deliberate consideration. See the broad strokes on motifs, schemata, narrative technique and language by Caskel, "Aijām," 9 ff., 34 ff., 43 ff.

13 See Jolles, *Einfache Formen*, 54 f., 61, and cf. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 139 ff. Frye (*Anatomy*, 55 f.) has noted another feature of constituent features of the epic, namely, episodic narration, which suggests an interesting line of genre-specific investigation, especially when related to the overarching structure of narrative (*ibid.*, 315 ff.).

14 See the observations made in "Ahistorisch," *EM*, although this article concerns more the "popular" interpretations of history.

15 Cf. the comments of Detienne, *Invention*, 77, Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 143, and Stock, *Listening for the Text*, 9.

But it does not seem that, overall, the genre-specific features encountered here require a treatment apart from the considerations discussed so far, except in so far as to say that, morphologically, the pre-Islamic *ayyām* might well be considered as a more elementary moment in historical composition, preceding the more formal redaction highlighted by attributed transmission -- [16] and often, as is the case here, surviving alongside the latter. The lack of the strong emplotment of an otherwise firm narrative trajectory serves to certify, in an indirect way, the relative immunity of the text's core content to significant tampering. So also does the absence of cumulative layers of narrative discourse that we can discern, and disengage, in the *ayyām*.[17]

In all this, one needs to bear in mind such evidence of revision as comes from repetition and variation, factoring in nevertheless the homeostasis of the plot, both of which mark oral transmission as well as genres of writing considered here.[18] In terms of these formal considerations, we might consider the *ayyām* in terms of the generic *akhbār*. For all the perspectives on the history of transmission opened by the study of variants and divergences, a sub-discipline which might indeed take on a literary identity of its own, and for all the resulting evidence of the recession from view of the original authorities involved,[19] we might conclude that the crucial point from the perspective of an historical reconstruction of realia is not so much that of ascertaining ultimate authorship as of the cumulative compulsion of the material, however indicative rather than conclusive the

16 Cf. the remarks of Jolles, *Einfache Formen*, 179.

17 Cf. Goody, *Interface*, 54.

18 Goody and Watt, "Consequences of Literacy," 31 ff. Goody (*Interface*, 263 f.), provides, on the basis of linguistic, psycho-linguistic, and anthropological evidence, a convenient listing of the lexical and syntactic features that help differentiate oral from written texts, relating to the use of nominalisation, the use of pronouns and adjectives, subordinate and coordinate constructions, predication and reference, and other features.

19 Leder, "Authorship," 71-3.

evidence.[20] This must be added to assumptions of the fastness and stability of the main plot-elements of the narrative line.

Indicative rather than fully documentary or probative much of the evidence might well be; but indices yield conclusive credibility once we have indexical materials on a scale as vast, as concordant in its core elements, and as cumulative as we have with Arabic materials, permitting a degree of certainty that allows for inference, and for drawing consequences from inference. Historical evidence is always indexical, for the simple reason that past realia are never directly perceptible. Too literal an understanding of the "wie es eigentlich gewesen" motif presumes implicitly that the document or the eye-witness transpose the realia bodily, as already noted. The record, however, when not spurious, is not the event. It only provides indices allowing the retrieval of raw materials that are then interpreted, with the use of judgement, into the body of history. The ultimate criteria are those of verisimilitude and intelligibility.[21]

Finally, weak emplotment, or no emplotment at all, is a distinctive feature of chronographic writing overall and of annalistic history in particular, and should in this sense be sufficient to disallow comparing at least this type of historical writing to the novel, or of overdrawing the analytical pertinence of what is taken for oral transmission with reference to this decidedly, almost archetypically, written form – there is no such

20 Leder, *Korpus*, 8, finds indexical evidence questionable, the reference here being to written codification in Umayyad times as used by the work of Asad on early Arabic poetry. On the use for the historical reconstruction of similar material in a different, but not dissimilar, setting, see the discussion of the *Heimskringla* cycle of Norse sagas, in which a similar set of historiographical questions arise as does in the *ayyām*: Bagge, *Society and Politics*, 10, 14 ff., 25 f., 239 f.

21 Landau-Tasseron, "Tribal Society," 180 f., as if by a default option, is willing to admit spurious reports of fact concerning early Islam, as these might be instructive about the period they describe and help in reconstructing patters of events when interpreted with reference to their context and in conjunction with other reports and with common sense.

thing as an oral chronology. This would include the annalistic *History* of al-Ṭabarī, whose overall coherence is lent by a chronological scaffolding, not by a narrative plot. If discursive, i.e. metahistorical, associative, implicitly causal, or otherwise conceptualisable sense is to be ascribed to it or read from it, over and above the narrative trajectory of its component reports, that is, if read as salvation history, such paratextual reading will need to be sought in the overall architecture, not in the detail of its narrative form or content, and in certain of its implicit thematic choices. Otherwise, like other modes and genres of chronological ordering, it structures its component materials without offering historical explanations. The composition of its narrative components is disjunctive rather than continuously narrative, and works rather as a guarantor of integrity rather than being a drawback[22] – in this case, a guarantor of scrupulous transmission, within the limits of human capacity.

Moving on to sources that might be said to have greater evidence of a discursive structure overlaying narrative, it must first be said that the overall narration of the period in history with which we are here concerned is very cogent indeed, despite internal discrepancies. This cogency reflects to a considerable extent the cogency of ultimate Paleo-Muslim triumph and the foundation of empire, a matter which not unnaturally invited a teleological account, broadly speaking, on the part of authors who narrated an historical itinerary from Arabia to Spain and Central Asia which was spectacularly successful, with the heavenly hosts decidedly on their side. Only the Qur'ān, the *ayyām*, certain elements in *ḥadīth* and other early narratives, and ancient Arabic poetry, do not bask in the afterglow of the Arab conquests which they predate, and are not foregrounded by the glare of the emergent grand narrative. This in itself is not irrelevant to our assessment of these sources.

22 See the analysis of relevant formal aspects of chronological arrangement in Mainberger, *Kunst des Aufzählens*, 285 f., and see the discussion of this aspect of Arabic historical writing, largely with reference to Ibn al-Athīr, in Al-Aẓma, *al-Kitāba at-tārīkhiyya*, 54 ff.

Authors of Arabic historical narratives – al-Zuhrī and a very large number of others, culminating in the collection of al-Ṭabarī – who ultimately constituted the grand narrative, were occasionally, but not as a general rule, triumphalist in tone, nor does such a tone and its teleological causalities forwards and backwards, proleptically and analeptically, structure their narrative plots in any significant measure. They were not purveying a legend, although they did relay legendary material, and the cogency and coherence of their historical work were not those of a well-constructed fiction, nor of a fable, irrespective of the occasional motifemic content. Al-Wāqidī's *Maghāzī*, for instance, a source of prime importance for Muḥammad's years in Medina, contains some but not much miraculous and legendary material, such as the intervention of angels in the Prophet's battles, or the Prophet's capacity to have water appear in the parched desert.[23] Such mythical material is readily identifiable, and is unsurprising.

Yet al-Wāqidī's sifting through his material and the different accounts it contains is thorough, a quality reflected in his occasional comment on his sources, each of which needed separate investigation in case of doubt. His marshalling of collective *isnāds* and combined, synoptic reports is impressive,[24] and it is difficult to understand the ease by which some scholars feel impelled to take this synopticism as the concealment of falsification.[25] Although the collective *isnāds* did not answer to the exigencies of medieval and modern *ḥadīth* criticism,[26] it displayed discrimination and a synoptic ability rather than carelessness or the lack of disciplined method; it might be described as the synoptic statement of the result emerging from *takhrīj*, with a clear authorial voice. Al-Wāqidī's care for accuracy in marshalling topographic

23 For instance, WAQ, 1037 f.; Jones, "Chronology," 2 and passim; Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, 339 ff.; "al-Wākidī," *EI*.

24 Lecker, "Wāqidī," 19 f., 27.

25 For instance, recently, Montgomery, "The Empty Ḥijāz," 68.

26 Hence the hostility to al-Wāqidī (and to Ibn Isḥāq) on the part of many *ḥadīth* scholars: ʿAlī, "Mawārid," (1950), 156 f.; Hoyland, "History," 21 f.

and other geographical detail, verified by the personal inspection of many a site, is impressive, as are his lists of participants in a variety of military and other events. His chronology, with some slight defects, is sound and consistent, disputable points in which can hardly affect the general picture of the events conveyed.[27] Much the same could be said of the chronologies of al-Zuhrī and Ibn Isḥāq.[28] Speaking of lists, which are plentiful in al-Wāqidī as well as in Ibn Isḥāq (among others), one might add that their enumerative rather than cumulative character not only gives them the air of the document, with objective brevity and de-contextualisation. Lists, like chronologies, are formally unthinkable in the context of oral transmission and are possible only in the medium of script; they have none of the tolerance of orality for ambiguity and anomaly.[29] Again, this is not without consequence for the assessment of these lists' detailed content, but also of the broader range of written material produced by the authors of lists.

The patterns of narrative construction discerned by recent scholarship have tended to be more in the nature of discrete motifs and themes than genres of discourse. Regarding the latter as if it were the former is generally much too close to the material itself to afford significant analytical value. Discrete narrative elements might be components in a variety of genres, and modern scholarship has in any case been generally concerned more with genres as identified and canonised by traditional Muslim scholarship than with genres as they might be understood today. The material of early Arabic historical writing have been identified in thematic terms: as *ridda*, *futūḥ*, *fitna*, administration, caliphal biographies, and genealogies, in addition to "secondary themes," to which are added schemata such as

27 WAQ, editor's Introduction (Arabic), 31 ff.

28 See the comments of Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 365.

29 See Mainberger, *Kunst des Aufzählens*, 5 f., 108, 178 f.; Goody, *Interface*, 275. The importance and documentary character of lists had already been underlined by Horovitz, "Earliest Biographies" (1928), 176; Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 36, spoke of their "testimonial function."

transitional formulae, pseudo-causes, aetiologies, and systematisation.[30] This identification and classification of motifemic elements is quite apt, as far as it goes. But it does not go far enough, and does not account for narrative emplotment and flow, better represented by the identification of the overarching themes and structuring elements of arché, preparation, "boundary themes," prophecy, community hegemony, and leadership,[31] all of which, separately and together with others, occur in a wide variety of genres. As indicated above with a slightly different slant, in connection with prophetic biography, five themes have been identified as the elements that structure the narratives: attestation, preparation, revelation, persecution and salvation.[32] Yet, as suggested, patterns are constituted of elementary particles of narrative, which they enfold but do not obscure. Such a classification of material is illuminating, provided it is not deployed in order to subsume individual particles of narrative under the metahistorical and other discursive purposes of composition, and to rest content with this, without making the move from the history of compositional genres to the history that they narrate, however complex.[33] We have seen that, for those scholars of a hyper-critical turn, the relationship is one in which discourse quite simply invalidates the veracity of the narrative elements.

30 Noth, *Historical Tradition*, ch. 1 and 4.

31 Donner, *Narratives*, 141 ff.

32 Rubin, *Eye of the Beholder*, is thus structured.

33 Thus, on the assumption that "the medium is the message," and that therefore there can be no qualitative difference between the event and the record of the event, the possibility of distilling significant historical content in order to arrive at a *Grundschicht* is denied altogether: Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 1, 4, 31 and *idem*, *Quranic Studies*, 58, where the author refers specifically to Sellheim, discussed below. See also Lecker, "Wāqidī," 27. With regard to the assumption often made that Ibn Isḥāq's work is "exegetical," and that it needs to be discounted as biography or history on this account, see Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 57, who nevertheless regards this imputation of exegetical purpose to be possibly misleading, if exegesis were taken in its technical sense, thus in effect vitiating this whole line of thinking.

No systematic attention has been directed, in available scholarship, to the relation between various levels of narrative, between the story-line (and its component elements) and the discourse in which it is incorporated as it enters particular genre-specific discursive formations. Moreover, little attention has been paid to narrative functions as units of content, which might act as "cardinal functions" or as "catalysers," to the distinction between sequence and consequence for emplotted elements, to the rigorous consideration of the way in which some features of narration identified by available scholarship, such as telescoping, might relate to these narrative functions.[34] A textual morphology would be eminently useful for historical reconstruction.[35]

These morphological matters apart, not much systematic reflection has been given to how these thematic arrangements might reveal the core of historical veracity or verisimilitude, beyond indicating that *fitna* accounts might date back to the Second Civil war, or that *futūḥ* might go back to the recollections of actual participants in the events narrated.[36] But there is not infrequently a strong impulse of a priori scepticism that is willing to see little to exist beyond *topoi*, and to concede only that not all the material is necessarily apocryphal – the reference here being to documents, letters and speeches.[37]

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34 Cf. Barthes, "Introduction," 87, 90, 93 f. This elaboration of structural elements applies equally, with a different terminology, to oral narratives as well: Hymes, "Ethnopoetics," 332.

35 Of course, in the first instance, attention to structural features in the context of narratives that might have an oral circulation before commitment to writing, would aid in the restitution of older texts: Hymes, "Ethnopoetics," 341 ff.

36 Donner, *Narratives*, 187, 205 n. 4. Juʿayṭ, *al-Fitna*, 129 ff., offers a robust and detailed study of the Fitna's sources, and arrives at the conclusion that, obvious and not-so-obvious problems notwithstanding, the overall skeleton of the historical accounts we have is sound.

37 Noth, *Historical Tradition*, ch. 2. The impulse of scepticism is most rigorously stated by Wansbrough, in whose work all accounts of the past are seen as purely salvation-historical reconstructions. See Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, ix and passim.

But of course not all forms of patterning obliterate the core, and not all later reports speak, of necessity, more of their own time than of previous times.[38] Stylisation does not necessarily imply the falsity of elements cast into stylised forms or the sequence of such elements. The almost Pavlovian tendency in modern tradition criticism to relate all elements narrated primarily to their circumstances of composition is very often belied by further consideration, as, for instance, in the tendency to regard ʿUbayd b. Sharyah's glorification of South Arabian tribes exclusively in terms of Syrian politics of his day to the exclusion of South Arabian oral and other traditions.[39] Elements added to a particular redaction must be seen in a perspective other than the mode of conspiratorial concoction described above; spurious material obeys the hallowed principle of verisimilitude and imitation, not that of invention.[40] If inventiveness there was, it would normally have followed lines that would disallow implausible insinuations, which would be arrested by memory.

One might usefully refer here to Thucydides' statement concerning his use of speeches, which occupy some one quarter of his *History*, and which has occasioned an enormous amount of discussion for over a century:[41] these were neither entirely contrived nor a purely ornamental rhetoric, but were

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Thus, for instance (*ibid.*, 25 ff.), the Battle of Badr becomes, entirely and quite simply, a narrative element in theodicy.

38 Cf. Saʿīd, *al-Nasab*, 530 ff.

39 Cf. Crosby, *Akhbār al-Yaman*, 83 ff.

40 Donner, *Narratives*, 210 ff. This is the principle of *mimesis*, or of *aemulatio*, serving as a guardian of veracity in Roman historiography, for instance: Lendon, "Historical Thought," 67.

41 *History*, 1:22: "In this history, I have made use of set speeches, some of which were delivered just before and others during the Pelopponesian war … I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in these speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as close as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation."

rather integral to his narrative, typifying historical actors and actions in a context where veracity and verisimilitude overlapped, and where the latter's validity was one aspect of the interpretation and coherence of events related.[42] It would be anachronistic to expect the neat separation of verisimilitude and veracity in pre-modern historical writing. The use of poetry in *ayyām* and *sīra* is of the same order,[43] and Hoyland has quite correctly spoken of a notion of "probabilistic truths" among certain authors of Arab sagas and conquest narratives,[44] a notion which, given the present account, should acquire a wider purchase. That neither Greek nor Arab historians sat in Ranke's seminar is by no means the end of the story, and more can be done with their legacy than lamenting the technical deficiencies of their writings.

Facts are not simply elements of detail in a narrative; their choice by the historian exemplifies narrative discourse. The implication is that facts of topography, for instance, enter historical writing in terms of the function they play in historical narrative and the structures they describe implicitly or explicitly.[45] But none of this should imply, in historical discourse or in discourse with an historical or monumentalising function, that facts are auxiliary to the narrative, or that narrative use necessarily entails relaxing conditions of verification. Ascertainable facts are the external conditions for historical discourse, irreducible to narrative, whether this be considered in formal terms or in terms of its conditions of emergence; ultimately, the event is an objective category upon which historical writing is premised.[46]

The task of the historian, properly considered, distinct from that of the historical philologist, requires far more than paraphrasing the sources

42 See the excellent account of Wilcox, *Measure*, 224 ff., 229 f.

43 See the account of Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 33; Caskel, "Aijām," 60 ff.; Gabrieli, "Elementi," 755.

44 Hoyland, "History," 39.

45 Koselleck, "Ereignis und Struktur," 560, 565.

46 Jauss, "Ehrenrettung," 554 f. See pt. II B of Koselleck and Stempel, *Geschichte-Ereignis*, for a discussion of events, fact, and historical narrative, beyond the lures of narrativism or form criticism at second hand.

in an apparent act of correspondence or mimesis, or of a transcription of reality in the form of a narrative. For any form of historical interpretation, verisimilitude is of the essence, hence the crucial importance of the criterion of plausibility. As has been well put in studies of the forms and techniques of Qur'ānic exegesis,[47] the occasional use of items of doubtful *isnād* is not likely to change the overall picture; and as suggested in a study of *jāhilī* poetry, the hope is that falsification, if such were to be the case, was so good that it would not disturb the overall picture.[48]

As has long been recognised, by medieval Arab historians among others, judgement upon traditional material is based on criteria of possibility and probability, not on criteria of an absolute judgement of veracity, with the result that falsification is more readily ascertainable than verification, to put the matter in minimally Popperian terms.[49] This is often seen to relate to the probity of witness rather than to the nature of evidence, as already observed. In other words, given the historical context of the narrative of any event in question, unintended consequences notwithstanding, a number of types of occurrence are possible, others excluded, according to criteria both of structure and of anachronism – to which should be added accounts that go beyond conventional standards of probability, such as legendary elements.

Building upon the foregoing, one would be able to counter the disinclination to deploy historical savoir-faire: to counter taking the hyper-scepticism of source criticism and of narratological analysis to be productive of cognitive nihilism, and the supposed gap of three quarters of a century that is postulated in transmission between the events during Muḥammad's lifetime and their earliest attestable narration as unbridgeable by the historian. We have examples of how this might be done, not least the use of factual elements in the sources that are not generally used in standard

47 Sinai, *Fortschreibung*, 168.

48 Wagner, *Dichtung*, 1:27.

49 al-Aẓma, *al-Kitāba al-tārīkhiyya*, 16 ff.; Al-Azmeh, *Times*, 79 f.

narratives and in the scrutiny of discordant reports or their rearrangement. One certainly, and very often, discerns elements in historical reports that do not tally with the presumption of a tight control of the process of composition by political or religious circumstances and constraints.[50] What needs to be done, crucially, is to go beyond the paraphrase of sources, and to put questions to the sources.

For now, it would be most useful, by way of demonstrative example, to draw attention to the systematic attempt by Sellheim to identify, layer and distinguish the various types of material in the biography of Muḥammad by Ibn Isḥāq,[51] the source of much of later historical writing on Muḥammad, Revelation, Mecca, Arab paganism, Medina, and much more. Sellheim quite rightly considers that there can be no "Patentlösung" to the question of veracity for narratives put forward by Ibn Isḥāq, and makes the important point that we lack stylistic and lexical studies of his biography, [52] to which one might add the lack of other kinds of formal study, as signalled above. It is worth repeating that, for all the bibliography, codicology and prosopography devoted to tracking *isnād* lines and supposed etymologies, there is precious little by way of linguistic analysis of historical texts, particularly syntactic, stylistic, lexical, and semantic-historical analyses, which would help orient our knowledge of textual layers and their chronologies considerably, and of course facilitate our identification of rewriting, beyond assertions that rewriting existed.

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50 For instance, Ibn Isḥāq's inclusion in his prophetic biography of material on al-'Abbās and his bitter enmity to Muḥammad prior to his conversion, which would have been displeasing to his 'Abbāsid patrons, and specifically to al-Manṣūr who had engaged him as tutor to the crown prince, and apparently instructed him to write an account of the Prophet's *maghāzī* for this purpose. This material was later removed by Ibn Hishām (Horovitz, "Earliest Biographies" (1928), 172 f.). See Zaman, "Maghāzī," 6-8, 16 n. 30.

51 On Ibn Isḥāq and his sources, see al-Dūrī, *Dirāsa*; on his immediate predecessors in the genre, Horovitz, "Earliest Biographies" (1928), 22 ff.

52 Sellheim, "Prophet, Chalif und Geschichte," 79.

Sellheim distinguishes, from the perspective of concern with veracity, three layers of text; veracity stands in a complex relation to verisimilitude, as suggested already. Starting with the most elaborate narratively, the second layer, this consists of materials accumulated around Muḥammad's biography in the course of controversies, political as well as religious, among Muslims over a period of two generations: examples of these can be identified as the biographies and profiles of al-ʻAbbās, ʻAlī and Abū Sufyān.[53] The first layer contains construals of the Prophet and of his world as a legendary figure in terms of standard monotheistic motifs, including Muḥammad's wonders, number symbolism, and prophecies concerning his advent, informed by late antique narrative models.[54]

Underlying both, and percolating through them, is a third, base layer, what Sellheim calls the *Grundschicht*. This conveys more or less immediate accounts, elementary narrative particles, of events concerning Muḥammad's person and time, containing, among other things, lists and catalogues of friends and enemies, the importance of which has already been underlined, accounts of individual and collective conversions, the Prophet's concrete conduct in war and peace. It contains documentary material, such as the so-called Constitution of Medina and some of the Prophet's letters. Some of this material, like that on al-ʻAbbās, does not present a wholly praiseworthy image of their subject,[55] another index of possible veracity and of the scrupulous transmission of older material. One might add that, enfolded in the monotheising history of pre-Muḥammadan religion in Mecca, is information on paganism far more convincing than the motifs and conceits of monotheistic polemics.[56]

In all this, Sellheim makes two important points. He sees in source and tradition criticism a helpful aid to fleshing out the location and content

53 Sellheim, "Prophet," 48 ff.

54 Sellheim, "Prophet," 54 ff.

55 Sellheim, "Prophet," 44, 46 ff., 73 ff. and above, ch. V, n. 47..

56 This point has been made by Pavlovich, "Qad kunnā," 68.

of layers of the constellation he proposed, but says little more on this matter. With regard to procedures of historical reconstruction, he advocates, with obviously good reason, the use of single events as a base.[57] The criticism of Sellheim's idea that such a kernel of fact be attainable and ascertainable is "seductive" but "misleading" because of the interwoven texture of the various accounts,"[58] would appear circular when countered by a procedure whereby the identification of single events is seen as a first step towards the recomposition of the narrative sequence. A very recent review of the traditions and scholarship on the "anti-prophet" Masaylima b. Ḥabīb, his relations to Muḥammad (and their correspondence), and his downfall, has revealed a stable and sound skeletal structure of realia amidst much affabulation.[59] Sellheim does not discuss the question of the ostensibly unbridgeable fifty- or seventy-five-year gap in transmission, although he does refer to oral sources of Ibn Isḥāq, without much deliberation.[60] And indeed, it is generally accepted that the earliest Arab accounts of their past, including repertoires of poetry, were orally transmitted,[61] a matter which shall be discussed presently.

There are serious problems with this view of a gap in transmission, which pays little attention to contrary evidence, and makes virtually no mention of the volume of material on the written transmission of tribal lore (including genealogy)[62] and of poetry from at least the middle of the sixth century, impressively gathered by al-Asad over half a century ago.[63]

57 Sellheim, "Prophet," 83, 88. This is the approach adopted productively with reference to the history of the 'Uthmānic canon of the Qur'ān by Comerro, *Les traditions*. The book appeared after mine had been completed, and could not be used to the extent it merits.

58 Hoyland, "Writing the Biography," 5.

59 Makin, *Representing the Enemy*, ch. 1, 2, 11.

60 Sellheim, "Prophet," 44.

61 "Riwāya," *EI*.

62 *GAS*, 1:245.

63 al-Asad, *Maṣādir*. The entire second volume of *GAS* is devoted to poetry up to the end of the fifth Hijra century, with pre-Islamic and *mukhaḍram* poetry occupying ch. II, and Paleo-Muslim and Umayyad poetry occupying ch. III.

The earlier material is somewhat scattered, but the cumulative effect is compelling.

The gap of a few decades between events and the recorded narration of these events might well have existed, but if it did, it did so sparingly, and not without mitigation, for reasons that have been indicated. In the field of Qur'ānic exegetical glosses, a gap may indeed be seen to have existed,[64] before the text moved on from phatic use and appropriation to being an object of deliberation, although the relationship between these moments is very complex. The longer gap with the *ayyām* and with poetry is apparently even more vexing, not least if we needed to deal with Arabic poetry that went further back before Muḥammad than is generally thought. Yet this gap refers to documented transmission, the transmission of determinate and retrievable content, which, as suggested, need not be *ipsissima verba* in order to be credible, versisimilar, or veracious. Raising up one's arms in incurious desperation about, or in delight with the absence of direct and hard documentary evidence, and the allergy to reasonable inference, is unhelpful to the historian, whose field of scholarship is not unfamiliar with successful forensic reconstruction of obscure periods accessible through difficult sources only. An attitude of ingenuosity which elevates, in the name of a simple redaction of positivism, recherché cluelessness to a scholarly virtue is not the contrary of gullibility, but rather signals resistance to contrary evidence, and incuriosity paraded as scholarly sobriety.

Finally, one cannot disregard the impression that this position of unwarranted resistance could well be sustained, in a manner undeclared, by prejudice which is reluctant to cite the cumulatively compelling evidence gathered by scholars with names like al-Asad or Sezgin. To the charge that al-Asad and others are on occasion uncritically respectful of their sources, or that they may have Arab nationalist or Islamic sentiments, one might respond by saying that this is still not reason enough to disregard their very considerable scholarship. One might also say that *ad hominem*

64 See Sinai, *Fortschreibung*, 267, 271, 273 f.,

charges of political, ideological, and religious partiality, routinely confined to Arab or Muslim scholars (known to medieval Muslim ḥadīth scholarship as *tajrīḥ*), has a far broader purchase, although, unless it be deranging, it is not a sure guide to the assessment of scholarship. It might be added that the proponents of the hyper-critical view have displayed an excess of tendentious enthusiasm which the former group do not match. Both share the same types of arguments, deriving from classical Muslim scholarship, which the former party seems better able to handle, in detail, without being overwhelmed by technical details to an extent that inhibits the possibility of inference, with the intention of seeing the wood for the trees and the ability to do so.

6

Transmission of Testimony: the Voice, the Pen, and the Author

Generally speaking, the simple and summary supposition is generally made, that the earlier transmitters of Paleo-Muslim materials, exemplified by ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr, recorded aide-mémoires, with little substantive analysis of this notion that might go beyond references to the Hellenic and Hellenistic *hypomnemata*, and beyond the statement that these were "private" notes, perhaps intended to help oral delivery. Later, it is supposed, emerged the *syngramma*, a type of text written for more general circulation or "publication," beginning more or less, we are told, with Ibn Isḥāq.[1] This seems, for all intents and purposes, to settle the matter; it is seen to demonstrate the thesis that composition was a fairly late event dependent upon prior oral transmission, and subject to

1 See Schoeler, *Charakter*, 6 f.; idem, *Oral and Written*, 80 – relying on an understanding of orality and literacy current in the nineteenth century and represented, in the field of studies of Islam, by the work of Alois Sprenger (d. 1893): Schoeler, *Genesis*, 3, 8. See, earlier, the comments in the same sense by Fück, *Ibn Isḥâq*, 6, 6-7 n. 19.

the vagaries of such. This point has been widely received in scholarship; the ability to encapsulate a phenomenon in a word (*hypomnemata*), not least as the word is Sterling Greek, and is one used by Foucault,[2] seems by implication to lend conclusive definitiveness to a thesis of original orality.

A number of observations are in order. *Hypomnema* (pl. *hypomnemata*) is a term with a wide range of reference. It can designate any kind of note, from the short note to bolster memory (an aide-mémoire strictly speaking), a merchant's register, a memorandum, to notes of public meetings, public records, minutes, decrees or petitions to magistrates, on to drafts of full-scale works, annals, treatises, dissertations, registers, and scholia. The noted historian and Senator Cassius Dio (d. 235) used the term with reference to official records of the Roman Senate,[3] and Aristarchus' commentaries on Homer were likewise classified as *hypomnemata*.[4] Even if we were to retain from these semantic directions only the sense of a text, of whatever length and of whatever nature, that is not entirely polished, it would still seem remarkable that the more appropriate terms *ṣaḥīfa* and *juz'* were not considered as the more appropriate technical terms; the same would apply to *taṣnīf*, designating a compilation of indefinite nature.[5] This is also the case for the word *muṣḥaf* which in the period under consideration still designated a book without being restricted to the Qur'ānic codex; al-Walīd b. 'Abd al-Malik's librarian was designated *ṣāḥib al-maṣāḥif*.[6] This point is especially

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2 The use of the term hypomnemata in the current scholarship discussed here might very well have been inspired by a reference made by Michel Foucault in a work widely circulated ("Interview with Michel Foucault," in Foucault, *Reader*, 363 f.).

3 Liddel and Scott, *Greek-English Dictionary*, q.v.; Detienne, *Invention*, 69; private communications from Niels Gaul and Cristian Gaspar.

4 Nagy, *Homer*, P§27.

5 These are taken up in *GAS*, 1: 55 ff., in the context of *ḥadīth*, but there is no reason to suppose that they were restricted to writings that eventually became such, and available evidence indicates that these were standard terms.

6 Eche, *Bibliothèques*, 18 f.

pertinent as these Arabic terms, in a sense identical to that of *hypomnemata* understood in the full breadth of its references, and as generic in reference as was *graphē* used by St. John of Damascus to refer to the Qur'ān as a whole and to individual chapters,[7] were already used in scholarship three-quarters of a century ago, in the context of a major discussion of the above themes that is rarely referred to.[8] Moreover, the term *ṣaḥīfa* was common in pre-Muḥammadan Arabia, used for poetry and later for the Qur'ān, and is in evidence in inscriptions.[9]

On this score alone, Schoeler's *hypomnemata* might have comprised far more of the early Arabic literary transmissions than fragmentary records, prior to "publication," such as the "notes" of a Ma'mar b. Rashīd (d. 770), for instance.[10] They should comprise reports attributed to 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr (though possibly not his epistles to 'Abd al-Malik), the works of al-Zuhrī, Mūsa b. 'Uqba, and, indeed, the larger works of al-Ṭabarī, al-Wāqidī, and Ibn Sa'd might be regarded as collections of such *hypomnemata*. They might be seen as *syngramma* in terms of their wide field circulation, and thus connect to the issue of "publication" mentioned above, a matter to which we shall return presently. But they have the hypomnematic air of reportage and of records, structured episodically and paratactically, much like the vast repertoire of what came to be constituted as *ḥadīth*.

None of these matters is connected to orality alone, or to assumptions of a disjunction between orality and literacy yielding to a later, almost natural transition from the former to the latter; it seems that, in all cases of which the two are regarded as generically distinct and separate, they figure rather as a classificatory and contrastive pair than as analytical concepts, on an implicit historiographical assumption that the one leads to the other

7 Greek text in Sahas, *St. John of Damascus,* 765A, 768 A – at 765C it is referred to as sygraphē, scripture.

8 Mackensen, "Arabic Books," (1935-36), 247 f., and see "Sheets," EQ, 4:587.

9 Maraqten, "Writing Materials," 309.

10 On which see the comment of Schoeler, *Genesis*, 6.

by some kind of natural transition once proper historical conditions are in place. Yet one would need to note that an aide-mémoire in this context is an ordering element for memory, and its point of reference; it is not a subsidiary to personal memorisation or secondary to it. It is, rather, the stable register of what memory might by itself dissipate, the medium of its secure storage, and the means of its retrieval. It is in effect not so much a subsidiary aid to memory as the corrector of memory and her controller; it refreshes individual memory but is not ancillary to it, belonging to a textual and cultural domain that goes far beyond the individual.

As the authority of Foucault seems to have been evoked subliminally, we might return to him and signal his suggestion that such personal notes in classical Antiquity were meant performatively to re-actualise their written content,[11] that is to say, that such notes are the guiding element in a relationship between memory and its written register and reservoir. Orality, in this sense, is not a mode of composition according to a number of rules that have been studied in detail and in a variety of contexts relative to illiterate societies,[12] nor a mode of retention, but a mode of communication, and indeed the very medium of "publishing." The texts of early Arabic traditions of interest to this discussion contain (and I am deliberately avoiding the word "retain"), as we have seen, many elements that are generally associated with oral composition.[13] Not all paratactic writing is tantamount to oral composition, and one need only consider lists in this respect. In the historical

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11 In a work published posthumously, later than the one quoted above: Foucault, *Herméneutique*, 350.

12 Well reviewed by Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 33-57: rhythmic/formulaic, additive rather than subordinative, aggregative rather than analytical, homeostatic, agonistic, situational rather than abstract, with much redundancy. Detienne, *Invention*, ch. 2, offers a particularly engaging discussion.

13 They are not alone to have this feature, which is very widespread, even in modern times and among us today. For a discussion of similar issues of parataxis and associated elements with reference to ancient Greek literature, and contra the "hard oralist" position, see Fowler, "Homeric Question," 225 f.

context of early Arabic composition, orality and literacy formed a system, the one always in determinate relation to the other.

In its turn, "publishing" would need to be looked at more closely, in tandem with a look at what the "private" nature imputed to early Arabic *hypomnemata* might mean. It is clear from the foregoing that there can be no automatic connection made between the *syngramma* and "publication," by which one presumes is meant the wider circulation of copies of a particular text. If publication were to be understood in economic terms, one would in all likelihood have to await the ʿAbbāsid period for any proper evidence of a market in books (apart from the court), and to this extent the earlier *ṣuḥuf*, whatever form they may have taken and whatever their length, were not intended for publication in this sense, although they were intended for circulation by means of oral delivery in specific but not closed circles, and in this sense they cannot be considered to have been private. There is precious little research on this matter, but the balance of probabilities seems clear enough.

If, however, the assumption were made that a text which was not intended for publication in the sense of written circulation was ipso facto "private," one would need to be far more guarded. That the earlier transmitters may not have made multiple copies of what they wrote, or at least not many, might well be true, but needs to be properly considered rather than taken for granted. But to draw from this the implicit conclusion that they did not circulate the content, and indeed the literal content, of what they had in writing before them would be widely off the mark. For indeed, texts of any description, in those earlier times as thereafter, were intended for transmission, doubtless with glosses, to be received aurally, only to be committed to writing again, leading to the well-known multiplicity of redactions;[14] repeated dictation is itself a form of publication.[15] Multiple redactions are often seen to becloud assumptions of scrupulous transmission

14 Schoeler, "Die Frage," 224; *idem, Genesis*, ch. 2, passim, has made this point well.
15 Mackensen, "Arabic Books" (1935-36), 250.

and the authenticity of authorship; but they might rather be otherwise regarded, as allowing development and accumulation around a core, rather than forgetfulness or inattention. Any loss of the original core content through errata of various kinds, word-substitutions, and similar matters would be the results of the constraints on reproduction in any era preceding mechanical reproduction. These are features eminently associated with the written medium,[16] with, in this case, oral delivery and aural receipt figuring as moments in the transmission and redaction of texts, in their "publication."

To maintain, therefore, that written redaction, understood as being limited to "literary publication," be "incompatible" with oral transmission,[17] is patently wrong and is out of keeping with what we know of the techniques of transmission of knowledge and of the methods of pedagogy of that age, based on *samāʿ* and associated processes which need to be considered as a whole. To this needs to be added the fact that we know little of the extent to which authors wrote down their own work rather than dictated it to amanuenses, as did al-Ṭabarī, Pliny or Aquinas.[18] Delivery and redaction were correlative rather than disjunctive, the one an integral part of the other in purpose, and variation is inherent to transmission. A redactor was neither an amanuensis nor a copyist strictly speaking, but performed *ʿarḍ* in confirmation of a text. Again, attempting to deal with the complexity of the

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16 Goody, *Interface*, 54. Doniger, *The Hindus*, 104 f., 106, contrasts the lack of variants in the *Rg Veda*, ostensibly transmitted orally over a very long period of time, and the *Mahabharata*, written down from an early date and existing in very many variants, remarking that it made no more sense to "read" the Veda than it would simply to read a score by Brahms and never to hear it. Zumthor, "Impossible Closure," 28, calls the oral preservation of the *Rg Veda* "extreme and unique," but cites many other texts, most notably songs, that have seemingly been preserved intact, and orally, over considerable periods of time, centuries in some instances, despite his insistence on the inherent instability in such transmission, which he calls mouvance, while also proposing (at 34) the possibility of "zero mouvance."

17 Schoeler, *Oral and Written*, 67.

18 See the most suggestive indications of Macdonald, "Literacy," 61 f.

issue by stating that the written hypomnematic text is of a "private" nature[19] seems so exiguous as to beg the question.

Clearly, then, it will be recognised that the supposedly private nature of texts such as those in question above needs to be seen in the context both of techniques of reading and modalities of transmission, in the social context within which the *ṣuḥuf* made their appearance.[20] It is hard to understand in what way, other than private possession, a text was then "private," if we were to exclude the incidence of silent reading, or of silent reading as the main mode of reading. It is commonly assumed that silent reading, with few exceptions, was a rarity in pre-modern times before the advent of print.[21] But it was not unknown, having been invented, apparently in Greece, towards the end of the sixth century BC,[22] although, even then, one needs to regard writing and silent reading as representations of the voice.[23]

Although the rarity of silent reading does not necessarily imply the absence of entirely private reading, usually aloud, as self-audition (a practice that persists still), one would nevertheless need to conjugate the act of reading out a written text with its social bearings, even in later, ʿAbbāsid times, when books had indeed become objects of commercial and other value, impersonally distributed and then again read out in public or private audition. The perspective of a dualism or a disjunction between orality and

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19 Cook, "Opponents of Writing," 476 ff., 504, with reference to *ḥadīth*, but clearly of wider salience. As against suppositions regarding an interdiction against writing ḥadīth, there are equally salient arguments from this discipline to sustain the contrary view, or to limit its remit (Hamidullah, "Introduction" to Hammām b. Munabbih, *Ṣaḥīfa*, 100-107.

20 Cf. *GAS*, 1:238 ff.; "Sheets," *EQ*, 4:588.

21 Manguel, *History of Reading*, 41 ff. This was predominantly the case in ancient Athens, in the full bloom of formal learning, as well: Detienne, *Invention*, 71. We do not have a history of reading Arabic.

22 Knox, "Reading," 422, 435 and *passim*.

23 Svenbro, *Phrasikleia*, 9.

literacy is distorting. What is interesting is the interface between them, a region of interference, and indeed an interface rather than a region characterised primarily or exclusively by transition from one (orality) to the other (literacy, the higher mode).[24] With reference to another context, this relationship was characterised as "vocal writing" along this interface;[25] writing took place more for the ear than for the eye, "with an ear to the words."[26] Complementarily, the reader ceded his voice to the text.[27]

The social bearings referred to have to do with the social purpose of texts, not least texts, like the ones of interest here, that deal with public matters, and that therefore require formal transmission and are intended for it. Research has revealed that the various terms used to describe this process of transmission, such as *samāʿ*, *ikhbār* and *ḥadīth*, quite apart from those that designate clearly transmission from written texts (*qirā'a*, *wijāda*, *mukātaba*, and so forth), designated transmission on the basis of written texts,[28] these being the *hypomnemata*. The term *isnād* itself, often followed by a full quotation, refers to a transmission involving writing, and is sometimes used to designate textual quotation.[29] In all, in the process of transmission and instruction, it can be said that there can be no master without a master-copy.

The conclusion must be that, as suggested above, the "private" written text, irrespective of how elaborate or fragmentary, was intended for public transmission, which is a social form of publication later to become commercial, and that it was the repository of textual memory: individual human memory was highly prized and ostentatiously displayed, but in

24 Svenbro, *Phrasikleia*, 6, and Byrskog, *Story as History*, 129 ff., 139 f., with a consideration of the Gospels, and ch. 3A, 3B2-3, with a consideration of ancient historians.

25 Svenbro, *Phrasikleia*, 188, 200.

26 Macdonald, "Literacy," 64 f. n. 61, and the literature there cited.

27 Svenbro, *Phrasikleia*, 55 and 56 ff.; Macdonald, "Literacy," 65 n. 62.

28 *GAS*, 1:58 ff., 77 ff. See now Hilali, "Coran."

29 *GAS*, 1:79.

practice, once intended for transmission, was structurally subordinate to the written redaction. Memorisation here stands as a metaphor for effective public communication, with reading and memorising, or the transmission of memory, being in effect a single activity.[30] What was at issue was not a preference for orality, or 'an oral culture,' but raher a culture of memory. This by no means implies that the written text was disposable, or that persons with famously accurate and copious memories did not write.[31] Indeed, instances of dictation from memory alone in the transmission of learning were unusual enough to be recorded as such.[32] Whatever objections against writing there may have been[33] must be seen as part of this socio-linguistic setting, in which prodigies of memory, be it for the retention of poetry or of *ḥadīth*, might be seen as a display of virtuosity, including, in the case of *ḥadīth*, of pious virtuosity. Moreover, closer scrutiny of this matter that might restore to it a certain complexity and historical credibility will yield a retrospective objection to writing aiming primarily, not at recording historical facts, but the deployment of a trope of original orality containing the sayings of the Prophet immediately and directly transmitted, with writing served up as a medium that was, with time, subject to accretions that led to the degradation of the original verb – all the while insisting that writing is nevertheless the vehicle of preservation, and the means of regaining the precision of the original utterance.[34] The praise of orality as an association with pristine, prophetic conditions for the circulation of *ḥadīth*, seems to subtend an implicit periodisation within classical *ḥadīth* scholarship distinguishing pristine conditions from those, later, ones that associated rhetorically written composition with adulteration, both taken as

30 Cf. Macdonald, "Literacy," 65 f.

31 *GAS*, 1:71 f. Even scholars of *ḥadīth* said to be opponents of writing their material down did, in fact, write: Azmi, *Early Hadith,* 26 f.

32 *GAS*, 1:71 ff.

33 This issue was first raised by Goldziher: see *GAS*, 1: 58 ff.

34 Helali, *Étude sur la tradition prophétique,* 61, 62-4.

topoi.[35] It seems as if modern scholars use some of the feeblest arguments of Muslim polemics and take them for statements of fact. Other considerations need to be kept in mind, not least the need perceived by some traditionists and legists to preserve the fluidity of practice as against what may have appeared, or have been intended to be, statutory constraints.[36]

In terms of the discussion of Arabic literary sources and their reliability, much is made of orality, chiefly in this context as a marker of unreliability, and as the chief condition of textual variation. But the enthusiasm for such a view needs to be tempered. Orality is, by all reliable accounts, and when understood in the simple disjunctive form as the opposite of writing, not the primary form of transmission; what is involved is not a story of transition from the one to the other, or of two successive and distinctive periods of transmission. As has been suggested, orality in the process of transmission, reading and redaction fed into the written medium from which it emerged, a medium which lent it a greater cogency, and, clearly, some ornamentation, before it fed back again into writing, according to the conditions and exigencies of writing, by corrections or contestation, by additions and condensations (including the crafting of the collective *isnād* for synoptic purposes), all of which ultimately produced variants.[37] It has also been suggested that textual variants are eminently utilisable, rather than being objects of derision for being such – in fact, omissions, telescopings, variations, are an excellent instrument to investigate "the hidden face of history," if one had the proper means of using them, and were prepared to do so.[38]

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35 Cf. the suggestive discussion of Helali, *Étude sur la tradition prophétique,* 115.

36 Dutton, *Origins of Islamic Law,* 30, 55.

37 Cf. the discussion of this theme, based on historical studies (primarily of Anglo-Saxon and medieval England) as well as the experience of folklorists and anthropologists (including the author), in Niles, *Homo Narrans*, 107 f. and ch. 4, passim.

38 Perrot and Terray, "Tradition orale," 327, 329, contra views widely spread by the influence of Vansina, *Oral Tradition*.

Textual stability in itself is no guarantee for veracity, and writing in itself does not guarantee integrity.[39] Redaction cannot be construed baldly in terms of a "transition" from the oral to the written, although it was that too, provided that the two categories, of oral and of written, were regarded as a continuum, disturbed by myriad feedbacks which constitute the bedrock of the relation between the two terms thus connected, and by outside interferences.[40] In terms of composition, neither is entirely subordinate to the other, and neither is indivisibly primary or epiphenomenal; but in terms of transmission and retention, clear primacy goes to the written. This is not an issue that arises among the Paleo-Muslims only. Recent work on Homeric texts might provide scholars of Arabic texts with a richer and better-rounded, precise and articulated notion of redaction and textual fixity or "rigidity" in relation both to writing and to performance.[41]

In view of all this, it does not really appear that the question of a fifty- to seventy-five- year gap in documentation is a theme that justifies the importance habitually accorded to it and in the terms of orality/literacy

39 Schoeler, *Charakter*, 9, and cf. Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 31 ff., 54 ff. The impressive erudition and scrupulous attention to detail evident in Schoeler's work on oral and written transmission fully recognises the complexity of the question, but in principle only, and consequently remains somewhat inconclusive, and in effect captive to the implicit notion of disjunction between the oral and the written, to the extent of being unable, for instance, to resist the temptation of bringing in what is clearly apocryphal pietistic material regarding the destruction by 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr of his own books because of the unnecessary supposition that only the Qur'ān should be written down in lasting form (Schoeler, *Charakter*, 30).

40 Leder, *Korpus*, 8 ff., brings out very well the feedback of what he describes as *Kollegien* in the process of redaction, but insists that texts were controlled from memory.

41 Nagy, *Homer*, P §§ 12, 15, where the author proposes a distinction between transcript, script and scripture, the last being a text that no longer presupposes performance, and P §§ 157, 167, 174 ff., where corrections, performances, and readings are discussed in relation to the Vulgate and the Septuagint.

in which it is formulated. It seems unlikely that there was such a gap, even less a gap between the oral and the written; postulating a gap between a period marked by oral transmission and a time when redaction comes to be primary[42] appears unnecessary, as well as implausible,[43] not least as we have seen that the relationship between memory, writing, and audition cannot be regarded simplistically in terms of "transition" between distinct and disjunctive modes of transmission. Such a view, moreover, takes the absence of physical evidence as evidence of absence, and seems unwilling to derive meaningful consequence from progress of research into the sources of Paleo-Islam, which is continually and consistently pushing the earliest redactions to earlier times. Clearly, what are designated as oral texts in the Paleo-Muslim period are oral in very much the same way as the most copiously written up Talmud is an oral Torah, to use a Rabbinical analogy much favoured by many hyper-sceptical scholars.

Such an assumption of primary orality is of course implicated, as we have seen, with a variety of rather simple assumptions about Paleo-Muslim orality and about imaginative forgery. The cumulative effect of this has been to disregard the cumulatively compelling evidence of the sources, for no compelling reason. We have mention of a variety of writings, including correspondence, emanating from the first generation of the Ṣaḥabā, including the Medinan Caliphs and such personalities as Abū Hurayra, Zayd b. Thābit, Muḥammad b. Sīrīn, Ḥuwayṭib b. ʿAbd al-ʿUzzā, and Makhrama b. Nawfal, dealing not only with material that later became *ḥadīth*, but with matters administrative, with poetry, *akhbār* registers, genealogies and so forth.[44] We also have the Constitution of Medina (about this there seems paradoxically

42 Schoeler, *Charakter*, 55 f., with respect to materials on the biography of Muḥammad. This is a very tenacious assumption in Islamic Studies, again starting with Goldziher, writing against earlier scholars who thought otherwise: *GAS*, 1:237.

43 Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 371 f.

44 Azmi, *Early Hadith*, 37 ff.; *GAS*, 1:239, 244 ff.; Abbott, *Rise*, 6 ff.

to be little doubt in scholarship), various letters attributed to the Prophet, and a variety of other documents of earliest vintage.[45]

Documentary material apart, most historical accounts have not come down to us intact and in their original redaction, in the way that the later *Akhbār* of ʿUbayd and some works of Wahb b. Munabbih – the earliest extant complete works – were transmitted virtually intact, with later interpolations and redactional activity distinguishable by signs of anachronism and by linguistic registers. Yet there is no reason to assume that the plentiful amount of early material cited or reworked in later sources and compilations is apocryphal because there is no manuscript or papyrus evidence for their earliest form. These were preserved in later works, and the question of manuscript or other direct physical evidence is relevant more to strictly codicological and philological than to historical study.[46]

It would not be unreasonable to suppose that much the same attitude towards this early body of material might be called for. The definitive establishment of the authenticity of the work attributed to ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr, does not exclude the knowledge that what we have transmitted from him is the result of a cumulative process that moved on from collection, possibly fragmentary, to inclusion in consolidated treatises,[47] in the form of codices – which were also, as has been suggested, collections of what current Islamic studies scholarship likes to call *hypomnemata*.

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45 See Hamidullah, "Introduction," to Hammām b. Munabbih, *Ṣaḥīfa*, 27, 25-33. I am yet to see any argument as to why documentary material pertaining to Muḥammad apart from the Constitution of Medina is generally disregarded, on the implicit or explicit assumption that it be apocryphal, or as to why the Constitution should be so privileged. Imperfect transmission does not necessitate regarding much of the substance of what is transmitted as documentary to be an invention or the work of fiction.

46 This point was signalled already by Renan, *Histoire générale*, 354.

47 In the context of what was to become ḥadīth, these stages involve, first, *ṣuḥuf/ajzā'*, followed by *tadwīn* (reflected in the archaising form of Mālik b. Anas' *Mudawwana*), and finally, *taṣnīf: GAS*, 1:55. Ḥadīth as a technical term is of later vintage, and this broad scheme of evolution would apply across the board.

This early generation was concerned with memorialising, and with registering events of public interest. Not unexpectedly, this activity was encouraged and patronised by the emergent Arab state. This is not a matter than can be taken up in any detail here, and it will suffice here to cite a small number of telling indices. There is evidence of a *bayt al-qirṭās* in Medina during the reign of ʿUthmān;[48] whether this was a workshop for the production of parchment, or a state registry, or both, and whether it betokened the early emergence of a scribal class, is unclear. But what it does indicate is that there was a concern with the provision of writing materials, and demand for such, likely to have been allied to the antiquarian and genealogical interests of the Medinan Caliphate before the troubled years of ʿAlī,[49] quite apart from the administrative requirements of the emergent polity. As we have seen, the Umayyads, from their earliest times, displayed a definite interest in assembling, recording and deploying Arabic poetry, Arabian antiquarian material (genealogies and *ayyām*), materials for the biography of Muḥammad and the early conquests (the emblematic figures here are al-Zuhrī, Muʿāwiya's evening companion ʿUbayd b. Sharyah, and of course ʿUrwa's missives to ʿAbd al-Malik), and *ḥadīth* materials (especially by Abū Bakr b. Ḥazm during the reign of ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz).[50] Memories were alive, and in continuity, and were clearly registered in writing to an extent that still needs to be determined, but not so meagre as to be neglected.

The postulated gap in written transmission of fifty to seventy-five years thus appears to call for reconsideration in the light of considerations of plausibility, rather than for decision by fiat and for lack of documentary evidence, and to require proper consideration of both material available and of the modalities of transmission. The position here proposed might be illustrated further, and varied, by the seemingly less tractable instance of the transmission of ancient Arabic poetry.

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48 Azmi, *Early Hadith*, 200.

49 See, for instance, *GAS*, 1:247 f.

50 See, in general, *GAS*, 1:57 ff., 247 f.

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The Pertinence of Poetical Evidence

In discussions of orality and oral transmission, poetry, like other textual material we have dealt with, is a body of literature supposedly oral in its initial transmission (but here, over a longer period), to which similar rules would apply as do to the larger category of materials transmitted from the pre-Islamic and Paleo-Muslim period.[1] Although the use of lines of authentication in poetry is meagre if compared to the prolixity of *isnād*,

1 Cf. the comments of al-Asad, *Maṣādir*, 134 ff., 143 ff., 151 ff. The comparison between the transmission of poetry and of *ḥadīth* (and other bodies of material) has not infrequently been made. In a spirited and cogent case for the written transmission of poetry, Krenkow, "Use of Writing," 268 and *passim*, emphasised the interconnectedness of oral composition and writing, considering the infelicity of transmission to be related not so much to faulty oral transmission, as to variant readings arising from writing – thus again, contrary to the view that written redaction, limited to "literary publication," is "incompatible" with oral transmission (Schoeler, *Oral and Written*, 67). The comparison has also been made, from different perspectives, by Beck, "'Arabiyya, Sunna und 'Āmma," 209 f., *GAS*, 2:27 ff., and Schoeler, "Writing and Publishing," 431 ff., noting synchronism and the common feature of confronting written texts with spoken forms in the context of an emergent standard Arabic. In the work

it might be reassuring to some scholars that lines of poetic transmission were not absent as *isnād*,[2] nor were the lines of authentication of transmission a negligible subject for transmitters of poetry, philologists and compilers of poetical corpora who, like others, practiced *takhrīj*. But in this field as well, there has generally been an attitude of wholesale a priori scepticism towards the authenticity of the Arabic poetical corpus, one that will have required, as in the case of narrative Arabic sources, a prodigious effort of falsification – not only the falsification of single strophes or entire poems, but the invention of "a whole history of literature."[3]

Like historical narratives, poetry had been received in many redactions, and the question of authenticity was set in much the same terms, including the indication that falsification might be applied to both written and oral material.[4] The process of collecting poetry (and, correlatively, the Arabic lexicon) was motivated by antiquarian and literary interest. ʿAbbāsid philological verification of and commentary upon this material parallels in many ways Alexandrian scholarship on Homer. In modern scholarship, the impulse to the investigation of the authenticity of poetry was given by the exemplariness, for philology, of work on the Homeric Question, initially associated with the name of

of Goldziher, the attitude to poetry largely replicated that to *ḥadīth* (*GAS*, 2:17).

2 al-Asad, *Maṣādir*, 261 ff.

3 See the comments of Bauer, "Relevance," 702.

4 Cf. Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written*, 41 and ch. 2 passim. That the question of counterfeiting was a concern of medieval Arab philologists is well known (al-Asad, *Maṣādir*, 325 ff.), and there were common-sensical and more elaborately philological criteria for distinguishing the authentic from the apocryphal (*ibid.*, 465 ff.). For a detailed treatment of variations, which are not very significant, see *ibid.*, 571 f., 551 ff. On the topic of variations, it might be noted that poetry quoted in the *Akhbār* of ʿUbayd b. Sharyah in the early Umayyad period, and ascribed to specific, real, authors (*ibid.*, 82), does not depart much from the variants available in the corpora compiled under the ʿAbbāsids that have come down to us.

Friedrich August Wolf, who sought by source and tradition criticism to unpick the question of Homeric authorship through the tangle of antique philology, leading up to establishing the question of authenticity.[5] Nevertheless, we need to remind ourselves that the chronological gap obscuring authorship is mitigated in the case of Arabic poetry by greater historical proximity and ethnographic continuity.[6] Recent work on the history of the Homeric texts, the vast length of time between the Archaic Age and Athenian and, later, the Alexandrian establishment of the Homeric koiné notwithstanding, displays a level of technical philological and conceptual sophistication from which scholars of Arabic *Schrifttum* could learn much.[7]

5 al-Asad, *Maṣādir*, 291 ff., and see 352 ff., where the author connects this nineteenth-century tradition of scholarship to the literature on the apocryphal nature of ancient Arabic poetry, and reviews medieval and modern scholarship in great detail. See also Porter, "Homer", 323 ff. Modern scholarship has concerned itself with the issue of the authenticity of poetry for over a century and a half now. This is usually associated with the names of Nöldeke, Ahlwardt, Margoliouth, and of course the cause célèbre of Ṭ. Ḥusayn in the 1920s. A recent review of this scholarship (Majā'iṣ, *Renan*, 10 ff. and ch. 1, passim, 107 ff.) has shown convincingly that it was Renan who first presented the problem in the terms which later became standard, and that later authors show evidence of acquaintance with his work on this issue, yet do not quote him directly. See Renan, *Histoire générale*, bk. IV, ch. 2, especially 350 ff.

6 The same types of issues for scholarship arise in a not too dissimilar case, that of skaldic poetry as an historical source (Bagge, *Society and Politics*, 10 ff.). The use of such poetry in the reconstruction of Nordic history was much prized by the emblematic Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241), who emphasised the integrity of skaldic memory (a plagiarist skald, Eyrind, received the sobriquet *Skàldaspillir*, "despoiler of skalds"), and very frequently quoted poems, considering them to be eye-witness accounts (*Heimskringla*, 4, 12, 12 n. 3, 217). But for all the reliance upon robust memories, reminiscent of the Arabs, Sturluson's overall discussion and application of method is, in comparison to those deployed by Arabic philology, extremely rudimentary.

7 See especially Nagy, *Homer the Classic*, passim.

Al-Asad has collected cumulatively compelling material which demonstrates that the oral character attributed to the transmission of poetry, and the insistence on the want of written transmission, are unsustainable,[8] or sustainable only with myriad reservations. The poetical transmitter (*rāwī*) did not transmit from memory alone, neither did the poet compose impromptu as a matter of course, as there is much evidence of a lengthy process of composition, involving revisions, drafts, and often long periods of gestation, all of which presumes the presence of written texts, perhaps *hypomnemata*,[9] and even poetical collections, *dawāwīn* (sg. *dīwān*).[10] Thus, "drafts" apart, the notion of an Ur-Text, however difficult and questionable this notion might be, cannot be seen to be an entirely redundant issue in this respect,[11] and formal considerations from oral-formulaic theory, and considerations of thematic structure and of archaic vocabularies and anomalous linguistic features, do sustain the idea of a relatively stable body of core verses.[12] There is no good reason to claim that no authentically pre-Islamic poetry was transmitted, authentic not only as to its transmission

8 Al-Asad, *Maṣādir*, 146 ff. ʿAlī (*al-Mufaṣṣal*, 9:250 ff.) is more sceptical, although he does admit that some of the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry at least was circulated in written form, even by the poets themselves, and finally settles for a vague position of incomplete early redaction.

9 al-Asad, *Maṣādir*, 191 ff., 222 ff., and certainly as *ṣuḥuf*: Farrukh, *Frühislam*, 100.

10 Mackensen, "Arabic Books," (1936-37), 42 ff.

11 Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry*, 1:20 f., holds that an Ur-Text remains elusive, and that to suppose that it may have existed as such before it was recorded, in writing as well as in performance, and thus "published," is questionable.

12 Zwettler, *Oral Tradition*, 212 ff. In an older discussion of Arabic poetry, Jacob (*Beduinenleben*, xx), defending the overall authenticity of the poetical corpus, noted that a possible manner of editing older poetry was to make it conform occasionally, in so far as possible, to what he considered to have been Quraysh Arabic, adding that the dialectal differences are likely to have been slighter among the Arabs than those within modern spoken German. Study of oral transmission also militates against the notion that non-literate cultures cannot memorise standardised formulae accurately: Goody, *Interface*, 176.

and attribution, but also as to its text.[13] There are attestable instances of keeping records of poetry, often at the instance of the various polities in place, and particularly of the Naṣrids (whose example was followed by the Umayyads and, later, the ʿAbbāsids).[14]

This matter must rest ultimately with an exploration of the social history of Arabia, which might identify locations of consolidated hubs of communication, and some literacy, and where the court of al-Ḥīra might have been imitated, an exploration which would lend plausibility to claims for the early existence of tribal collections of their poetical corpora.[15] It will also require a more precise knowledge of the procedures of poetical competitions, such as those at ʿUkāẓ. The seemingly socio-economic argument that writing materials will have been expensive or scarce[16] is not convincing, as it is in the nature of memorialisation to be costly, and writing materials were indeed available, in what quantities and under what conditions we have no way of knowing.

Yet the romantic image still persists, even among experts, of the *jāhilī* Arab poet holding forth, composing impromptu and on the spur of the moment, and having his poetry transmitted orally.[17] As indicated above, there are historical indications that poetical composition – if we exclude *rajaz*, possibly excepting some *rajaz* recited ritually -- was a deliberate and

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13 The two issues of transmission and attribution are distinct: Renan, *Histoire générale*, 358.

14 The primary study of this is al-Asad, *Maṣādir*, 109 f., 111 ff., 160 ff.; see also Krenkow, "Use of Writing", 162 ff., supported by Rosenthal, *Technique and Approach*, 6; Schoeler, "Writing and Publishing", 426 ff.; Juʿayṭ, *Sīra*, 2:36 ff.

15 For a detailed treatment of each of the separate tribal corpora of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, and of their variations, which are not very significant, see al-Asad, *Maṣādir*, 551 ff., 571 f.

16 ʿAlī, *al-Mufaṣṣal*, 9:259. Cf. the argument against the view that the want of paper might be used in arguing that ancient Greek poetry was not committed to writing (Fowler, "Homeric Question", 225).

17 Monroe, "Oral Composition", 37, 40.

lengthy process, and not infrequently involved writing.[18] Improvisation (*irtijāl*) and special, ready and nimble poetical gifts (*qarīḥa*), though they might be assumed to have existed in many instances and are reflected in the sources, also bespeak the practiced legerdemain of claims to virtuosity, by the poet and by the *rāwī*. But studies of Arabic poetry in recent decades have taken another turn in this regard, and studies of authenticity have more recently revolved around the formal characteristics of oral-formulaic composition, although the term "formulaic" is, of course, redolent of associations with disassociation from historical reality, and with the lack of authorship, which are the issues of primary interest in this discussion. In effect, the oral-formulaic thesis has come to play a similar purpose in the field of poetry as constructivism and narrativism have with regard to historical narratives.

The theory of oral-formulaic composition, pioneered several decades ago by Milman Parry, has developed since, but has generally been applied to Arabic poetry in a somewhat telegraphic and truncated form. As is well known, one of Parry's principles was the "principle of economy." The Homeric epics consist of not more than two-thirds of expressions that might be designated as formulaic, and the principle of economy precludes a poet's capacity to retain a sufficient number of formulae to suit all occasions; hence the phenomenon of variation over time.[19] This would, in itself, lead us to exclude the longer Arabic poems of known authorship from the clutches of orality simply understood, even if we were to see some limited merit to regarding "formulaic density" as a measure

18 Cf. Wellhausen, "Poesie," 59; Krenkow, "Use of Writing", 166. If one were to compare such Arabic poetry with texts of an almost legendary oral status, the Sanskrit Vedas, close scrutiny would reveal that the ascription to the latter of an oral composition might be overstated, their textual organisation and the mnemonic devices used for their retention and transmission showing traces of influence by writing: Goody, *Interface*, ch. 4, passim. This point ultimately rests on how one understands formal differences between the two.

19 Finkelberg, "Oral Theory", 236, 247 f.

of orality -- some circumstantial and indexical merit, for not all formulaic expressions indicate oral composition necessarily. That *jāhilī* Arabic poetry contains a formulaic proportion hovering around the 90 per cent mark, as has been proposed, is implausible,[20] unless the meaning of "formula" is stretched beyond analytical utility. The supporting argument that in later Arabic poetry, composed under different conditions of literacy during the ʿAbbāsid period, the formulaic density falls to just over 30 per cent,[21] need not be interpreted in terms of a contrast between literacy and orality, but by the rise of a new notion of individuality and authorship attendant upon urbanisation and the great social transformation brought about by empire, and of course one needs to bear in mind the cogency of what the author takes for a formula. A solution to this question might as well be sought in the proposition that pre-Islamic poetry was not so much oral as pseudo-oral, just as later poetry was associated with a Bedouinising, antiquarianist intellectual elite associated with the centres of antiquarianising authorities.[22]

20 Monroe, "Oral Composition," 34 ff. The author's identification of what constitutes a formula, a formulaic system, or a structural formula is clearly much overdrawn, as it includes ordinary syntagms, synomyms, and other ordinary features of all linguistic usage (20 ff.). It does not take into account developments and refinements in the field since the time of Parry and Albert Lord; nor does it go into the complex issues arising from the process of composition and its connection with prosody. A formula, in any case, is too limiting an expression, and one would by preference adopt the notion of an open-ended family of allomorphic phrase groups reflecting a central Gestalt (Zwettler, *Oral Tradition*, 6 f.), itself expressed in variations of motif (Stetkevych, *Zephyrs*, 231). Some scholars consider the oral-formulaic theory to be inapplicable to Arabic poetry altogether, on the grounds of internal and external evidence (Bateson, *Structural Continuity*, 33 ff., 55), and on a number of formal grounds, including length, themes, generic differences and other formal considerations (Jacobi, "Altarabische Dichtung," § 2.1.1) – some of these features are indicated by Monroe, "Oral Composition", 40. See the treatment of Zwettler, *Oral Tradition*, ch. 4, and the overall comment on this book by Schoeler, "Anwendung," as well as the earlier objections of Wagner, *Dichtung*, 21 ff.

21 Monroe, "Oral Composition," 36.

22 Montgomery, *Vagaries*, 255.

That formulae and other compositional templates existed is beyond doubt. One need only think of recurrent motifs, the standard tripartite division of the ode (*qaṣīda*), and of course of the constraints of Arabic prosody which, like other forms of contrived speech, also serves to store information and as a mnemotechnical aid. Oral-formulaic features apply just as well to writing as they do to oral texts.[23] Clearly, the theme of orality is a formulaic trope which needs to be treated with much sensitivity; oral-formulaic theory does not lead to the denial of the integrity of ancient Arabic poetry, but might provide a way of checking dubious poems formally, while the bulk of this corpus is on the whole authentic, without this necessarily implying that it is an exact record of an Urtext,[24] which might itself be considered as a real or hypothetical template with determinate possibilities for variation within set parameters.

But what remain intractable are the precise lineaments of the process by which whatever texts of *jāhilī* poetry that had been recorded in writing arrived into the hands of the later, Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid redactors, and very likely earlier ones as well. The special case being made for authored poetical texts of some length has already been mentioned. The salience of memorialising functions for the scrupulous transmission of textual material has been mentioned, and it applies equally well to poetry, *dīwān al-ʿArab*, as it does to historical accounts, including the *ayyām al-ʿArab*.

There is little doubt – and some evidence -- that redactors did tamper with some of the material they handled, perhaps excising references to pagan deities,[25] for instance, or correcting the metre, or in some less scrupulous ways. Yet, as in the case of historical narratives,

23 Dundes, *Fables*, 20, who mentions by way of example graduation addresses, book reviews, obituary notices, and letters of recommendation, to which might be added political speeches and a certain type of academic treatise. But of course the accent here is on formulaic composition, not on orality.

24 Monroe, "Oral Composition," 41 ff., and cf. Wellhausen, "Alte arabische Poesie," 123, for a less exact formulation.

25 This had been suggested already by Renan, *Histoire générale*, 360 f.

variations that appear tend to confirm a tradition of transmission rather than to cast doubt upon it. Moreover, the sifting of this material is not beyond the capacities of historical philology; this is attested by the labour of ʿAbbāsid commentators and philologists already, and modern scholars have indicated sensible ways of following suit as well.[26] It is clear that this poetry is amenable to use in writing the history of the pre-Islamic Arabs, particularly for *ayyām*, and for identifying names, events, and places. It also includes narrative sections, some fairly long, such as the ferocious middle part of *muʿallaqa* of al-Ḥārith b. Ḥilliza al-Yashkurī (fl. middle of the sixth century), material which might be treated in a way similar to material registered in the *ayyām*. In addition, it will be clear in later discussions that poetry constitutes a most important source for ethnographic material on the Arabs, including Arab polytheism.[27]

As suggested above, the use of poetry seeks out the smallest items of narrative information, as well as other indicators of it relating to religion and ethnography. No assumptions, however, can be made about the ability to use poetry systematically for purposes of chronology.[28] The exactitude of record borne by reliable transmission might be required for precise philological investigation; an inexact but verisimilar record allows inferences, depending on the purpose of using this or that poetical statement. In all events, a

26 See circumspect review and exploration of possibilities by Wagner, *Dichtung*, ch. II, especially 25 ff.; Montgomery, *Vagaries*, 38 ff., 39 n. 78, discusses transmission suggestively. But the major work remains that of al-Asad. See also Arafat, "Controversial Incident," for work on a particular poem by Muḥammad's panegyrist and propagandist, Ḥassān b. Thābit, on whose poetry in the *sīra*, from an oral-formulaic viewpoint, see Monroe, "Poetry of the Sīrah."

27 It is appropriate here to highlight Farrukh's 1937 work on Paleo-Islam as reflected in contemporary poetry (*idem*, *Frühislam*), although the minute chronological precision he postulates does not always appear to be justified. I was able to have access to Imhof's valuable *Religiöser Wandel* only after this book had been written, and unable to make appropriate use of it.

28 See Agha, "Verse," 9 ff., for a consideration of the way in which the famous *munṣifa* of ʿAbd al-Shāriq b. ʿAbd al-ʿUzzā al-Juhanī may be used for historical purposes.

general rule of thumb would be a case-by-case consideration if doubt should arise that a particular poetical line or statement be anachronistic or otherwise unlikely.

Apart from longer poems, a very large amount of poetry is preserved in the *ayyām*, much of it short, constituting an integral part of the action depicted in these texts and, like the mother texts, on occasion anonymous, or put into the mouth of narrative actors: as commentary, panegyric, elegy, boastfulness, or the versification of the elements of narrative action redacted in prose.[29] Some of this may well be apocryphal. But it is strongly indicative, in the same sense that the *ayyām* themselves are indicative, of an ethos, of certain events, of tribal and other relations, and of individual biographies and geographical locations, to be used as secondary documentation when properly read with curiosity and with an eye for the telling detail. Although the absent author is here more than a discursive effect, the repertoire of poetry might indeed be considered to be an archaeological site, but one with a discernible or otherwise decipherable stratigraphy.[30] Distortions in light of the present of the redactors contain much that is suggestive and retain much of what was original, and do not render the import of these poems inaccessible.

Ultimately, if oral memory be homeostatic, storing what is useful and jettisoning the rest from the vantage point of the present, and if literate societies have no system of elimination and no structural amnesia, implying that the pastness of the past cannot operate without a written record,[31] one might well reach the conclusion safely, that Paleo-Muslim and Muslim Arabs, with their acute sense of epic distance from Muḥammadan times,

29 Caskel, "Aijām," 59 ff., has discussed the rather loose relationship between poetry and narrative prose in the *ayyām*, and was of the opinion that it was intrusive and betokened later intervention.

30 See the comments on the Homeric corpus as an archaeological site with a palpable stratigraphy by Porter, "Homer," 330.

31 Goody and Watt, "Consequences," 31, 33 f.

and less of a distance from the times of the *ayyām*, both endowed with different measures of “a radical sense of completeness”,[32] must have used their *hypomnemata* as more than a fragile record and a fickle medium, but rather as a medium of collective conservation and memorialisation.

32 Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 17.

8

Preliminaries to the Use of the Qur'ān as an Historical Source

That particular period of epic distance mentioned above left us, among other written documents later incorporated into diverse, broad textual assemblages and genres, one monument of extraordinary complexity and importance, which is the Qur'ān. Its documentary and testamentary value is both direct and oblique, requiring interpretation in terms both of its "plain sense," here regarded as the attempted recovery of the sense of its words and statements as they will have been understood to its original audience, and in terms of references, direct or indirect, to events and conditions surrounding its inception. The text as we have it contains references to specific events, rarely, though, to events occurring before Muḥammad's migration to Medina. Among others things, it refers to the defeat of the Byzantines and, presumably, to their loss of Jerusalem in 614; to the battles of Badr and Ḥunayn; to the reaffirmation in Paleo-Islam of pagan pilgrimage rituals at the time of al-Ḥudaybiyya; to Muḥammad's expedition against Khaybar; to the expulsion from Medina of B. al-Naḍīr; and to Muḥammad's interference with Mecca's food supplies, and his

marriage to Zaynab. It also refers, often in a contradictory sense that testifies to current developments, to a number of ritual and doctrinal matters.[1] It tells us about Muḥammad's revelations, his relationship to the unseen, and about theophany, and tells us not a little about the Arabic language. It is silent on a number of major events, such as the boycott of Banū Hāshim by the Quraysh and the emigration to Ethiopia,[2] which might reflect the dynamics of the process of composition and canonisation discussed in *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*, where an interpretative model for it is suggested in ch. 7. Finally, the Qur'ān provides ethnological and religious documentation about the Arabs; among other things, its use of rhymed prose provides evidence of pagan soothsaying.[3] It provides testimony about the religions of Arabia.[4]

On present evidence, the text was redacted in writing very early. Moreover, if "formulaic density" be anything to go by, one might mention that the Qur'ān has been estimated to have a formulaic density of over 20 per cent, not as high a percentage as to warrant an oral-formulaic perspective, despite the fact that its oral-aural delivery, reiteration and reception were crucial, although it needs to be stated that writing intervened at many stages.[5] For the purposes of the present argument, a number of brief preliminary comments would nevertheless be in order.

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1 A most convenient and clear account, not entirely complete, is given in "Ḳur'ān," *EI*, 5:415a. References to events contemporary with Muḥammad are given in "Chronology of the Qur'ān," *EQ*, 1:319 f. Nöldeke (*GQ*, 83 f.) seems to think that references to Muḥammad were later interpolations.

2 "Muḥammad," *EI*, 7:364b-365a.

3 Already noted by Wellhausen, *Reste*, 135.

4 Crone, "Religion," discussed briefly in *A History of Islam in Late Antiquity*, perceives this point consistently, but provides an unsustainable interpretation.

5 Dundes, *Fables*, 65. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 48, is among those few who propose that the presence of formulae is no proof of oral composition, a point that fits well into the overall thesis he proposes on Qur'ānic composition.

As might be expected, the problem of a gap in transmission mentioned above, as well as questions connected with Qur'ānic chronology, have caused many scholars to question the view that the Qur'ānic text lends itself to use as an historical source.[6] Others have proposed, in response to this mood, that Qur'ānic material be brought back in as material of documentary value,[7] and that the text might be used as an historical source not in the sense that it provides factual detail, but in so far as it confirms detail derived from other sources.[8] The Qur'ān allows, when properly read, for extensive inferential use, in tandem with other sources, and in light of the comparative use of materials from ethnography and the history of religion.

Yet, anticipating discussions in *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*, it might be stated here that, at least in terms of early Paleo-Muslim composition, there is no reason to doubt the massive scriptural and aural presence of the Qur'ān in its historical settings of composition and delivery; revisionist chronologies of its composition can be discounted assuredly.[9] For a consequent reconstruction of the development of Muḥammad's teaching and a variety of other issues, certain assumptions of relative Qur'ānic chronology need to be made. The chronology of relevance is not that of final canonical redaction, but of what Muslim traditions regard as revelation, and it is to a considerable extent dictated by literary sources such as those discussed above which, when assembled as Circumstances of Revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), provide "a narrative structure."[10]

But it must be added that these account for only a restricted portion of the text overall.[11] Exegesis pertaining to *asbāb al-nuzūl* tended to yield, as with the early exegete Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 767), complex interweavings

6 For instance, Paret, "Koran als Geschichtsquelle," 137 ff.

7 For instance, Neuwirth, "Erstes Qibla," 229, with reference to the Muslim direction of prayer, with a discussion of relevant scholarship (at 232 ff.).

8 Ju'ayṭ, *Sīra*, 2:22 f.

9 See the excellent discussion of Motzki, "Collection," 8 ff.

10 "Revelation," *EQ*, 4:444, and see Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, 108 f.

11 "Ḳur'ān," *EI*, 5:415b.

of Qur'ānic text and auxiliary material in terms of a dramaturgical autonomy of the latter: the Qur'ān was integrated into other narratives, but other material was in its turn "lemmatised" to serve properly exegetical purposes.[12] That this tendency by Muqātil to subordinate the Qur'ān to other narratives is confined to his considerations of *asbāb al-nuzūl* should be highlighted in preparation for the extensive use to which his exegesis can be put. This particular exegesis had fallen out of the mainstream of Muslim exegetical literature precisely because it addressed the Qur'ānic text directly, rather than through the filter of exegetical tradition,[13] which is testimony to its historical usefulness. Nonetheless, *asbāb al-nuzūl,* regarded in terms of historical narration, does contain serviceable elements of historical vintage.

Qur'ānic chronology might be constructed according to a variety of internal criteria: stylistic and dogmatic criteria, and others pertaining to conformations of content and forms of address within the Book.[14] All of these attempts are in a certain way circular, using the Qur'ān itself to tease out a chronology of its component texts; those relying upon dogma need to postulate a specific line of development,[15] which in itself needs reconstruction and historical justification. Such circularity is unavoidable in certain measure, but it need not be a counsel for despair if approached with suppleness and alertness. One needs to add to these inner-Qur'ānic indices of correlation between particular Qur'ānic statements and such events in the early history of Paleo-Islam as might be gleaned from historical and exegetical works, which might be seen to constitute elements of external evidence. An internalist vision in which enunciative and thematic types are

12 Sinai, *Fortschreibung*, 219 ff, 229, 235 ff.

13 Sinai, *Fortschreibung*, 274 ff. On this tradition, see Saleh, *Formation*, 14 ff. and "Exegesis, Classical," *EQ*, 2:99-121.

14 See the accounts of the different approaches to Qur'ānic chronology in "Ḳur'ān," *EI*, 5:416b ff., and Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, 110 ff.

15 Grimme, *Mohammed*, 2:25 ff.

taken for a chronological sequence seems arbitrary and unconvincing,[16] and rests upon premises that remain to be argued.

The kind of chronological consideration that has just been touched upon was conceived as a supplement or corrective to that of Nöldeke, whose rough chronological division of Qur'ānic revelation of 1860 (following Muslim traditions in broad outline), supported by thematic and stylistic features, fell into three Meccan periods and a Medinan period,[17] and has been the most widely accepted in scholarship. Verses from these periods moved on from a series of very short chapters with rhymes and final assonances, carrying a message of impending calamities expressed in an idiom of natural disasters and of betylic wrath, invoking some eschatological visions in later, biblicising redactions. Later came another body of texts, with somewhat longer chapters, that introduced the idea of monotheism, rejected idolatry, and contained glimmerings of a notion of prophetic history and continuity. The third Meccan phase displays longer chapters, marshalling much the same thematic material. Subsequent to these are chapters considered Medinan, some of whose stylistic features figured in the third Meccan period, containing much by way of ethical and legal injunctions, historical allusions, and polemics against Christianity and Judaism highlighting, crucially, the notion of an Abrahamic primeval religion. Throughout, Nöldeke highlighted the interpolation of Meccan material within Medinan chapters, and vice versa, as medieval Muslim scholars of the Qur'ān had done long before. Overall, this served as an approximation sufficient to group together certain facts,[18] but we see within

16 Hirschfeld, *New Researches*, 36 and ch. 3-7, proposes a "natural order" of Revelation falling into five groups: confirmation, declamation (messianism, prophecy, Last Judgement and a Book), narrative (moral and Biblical), description (of creation and of nature and its Signs), and legislation.

17 *GQ*, 2:74 ff., 117. ff., 143 ff. See Stefanidis, 'The Qur'ān,' 2 ff. and passim, for evolution of this and other linear assumptions about the development of the text.

18 Gaudefroy-Demombynes, "Quelques noms," 4.

it a somewhat abrupt division into three periods identified by the markers of declining enthusiasm, decreasing pathos and increasing length.[19]

Nevertheless, it has been suggested recently, and justifiably, that Nöldeke's chronology might be retained if subjected to a number of adjustments in detail and given greater precision by formal analyses such as those of Neuwirth.[20] This would take into account a distinction between diachrony and form, working through clusters of convergence between the parameters of text structure, introductory formulae, length of verses and of chapters, and rhythmical profiles.[21] More recently, this assumption of linearity, with many refinements, were deployed by Sadeghi, who moved the procedure from the artisanal to the high end of electronic technology currently available, while preserving the major assumptions of previous studies. He produced a rigorous technical stylometric study of a number of criteria: common words and morphemes, function words, verse length, word length, and *hapax legomena*. The conclusion of this work was that, different tempi notwithstanding, the Qur'ānic text can indeed be characterised by a linear evolution, albeit one that can be expressed with far greater complexity and precision than that of Nöldeke, resulting in seven distinct periods, five of them Meccan,[22] and to this extent could promise a significant advance to historical scholarship. Nevertheless, the assumption of 'concurrent smoothness' in the linear transitions discerned[23] as a primary criterion might be questioned in view of the complexity of Qur'ānic composition over time, with Muḥammadan declamations, multiple reiterations by him and others, grammatised redaction, dialectised proclamation, written and

19 Hirschfeld, *New Researches*, 36.

20 Most systematically and elaborately, Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition*, where the literary unity of Qur'ānic chapters is emphasised, a point on which reservations should be made; of wider reach is Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, ch. V.

21 Sinai, *Fortschreibung*, 66 ff., and ch. 6 and 7, where this suggestion is worked out in detail with regard to the Abraham pericopes.

22 Sadeghi, 'Chronology,' 212, 217 f., 282 ff. and passim.

23 *Ibid.*, 268, 288 and passim.

oral transmission, all related by multiple feedbacks: these matters, taken up in *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*, render the linear model distinctly questionable.

There is of course a fundamental problem with the linear model, namely, that it is based largely on the formal analysis of the Qur'ānic chapters as they have come down to us in redacted form, in the context of which their *Sitz im Leben* is understood in far too general, rough and approximate a way – all highlights of early and pioneering efforts. It depends, crucially, on the assumption that formal characteristics correspond to a diachronic trajectory, and, in the case of Nöldeke, on the assumption that the Qur'ānic chapter (*sūra*) lends itself to formal analysis as a unit, and needs to figure as the primary unit of analysis. This view is only partly justifiable, and requires consideration in terms of Qur'ānic redaction as distinct from revelation; this distinction would produce multiple dislocations between the order of Muhammadan enunciations and the order of redactions, which need not be that of the first occurrence of a particular enunciation and prior to repetition, reiteration, and other modes of delivery, oral and written, by the Apostle as well as by others, and redaction following these processes. Sadeghi holds that discontinuities in linearity do not invalidate the argument for linearity, and that, when it occurs, nothing can be concluded from it.[24] The difference lies in the overall view of textual genesis and development. Crucially, this involves different models of interpreting this genesis and this development, with Sadeghi clearly beholden to the view that the growth was textual rather than social and performative, with an assumption of one continuous author, the Qur'ān thus being, *expressis verbis*, Muḥammadan. This view is less convincing than that of Bell with its attention to *Sitz im Leben*, however much one may disagree with him about questions of detail.[25] Having said this, I should like to stress that the need to move away from a stenographic model of Qur'ān composition to a more complex consideration of redactional

24 Sadeghi, 'Chronology,' 288, and 268, 288 for comments on Bell.

25 See Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, 111 f.

authorship need not imply an open-ended field of potential authors or inter-textual interferences, this last being as thriving an enterprise today as it was in the nineteenth century.[26]

There is not sufficient space here to discuss this matter in detail, and it will suffice to say that what might be termed the "documentary model" proposed by Bell is one which, although it does not lead to a discounting of the overall chronological model proposed by Nöldeke and refined by others taking the work of Bell into account,[27] is yet one which is more attentive to a *Sitz im Leben*. Bell's is an analysis of Qur'ānic chronology which, with greater historical probability, treats single verses *(āyāt*, sg. *āya*), rather than chapters, as the main units of revelation, and therefore of analysis – their redactional conformation into chapters is a distinct question, and needs to be treated as such, rather than taken for granted as a premise for further analysis.

Bell's approach is intent on examining what the text says rather than what it was made to say by later exegesis.[28] This approach would enable us to place certain limits on the use for chronology of purely formal criteria of style, diction and thematic content, to which chronological considerations

26 Such an implication might be arguably inferred from Reynolds, "Le Problème", passim, where the author makes a number of important critical comments on received chronological schemes for the Qur'ān, with a robust plea, not sufficiently justified, for disengaging the chronology of the text from the biography of Muḥammad.

27 See, for instance, Blachère, *Introduction*, 82.

28 Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, 113. Paret, *Grenzen*, 10 ff., was critical of Bell, preferring intra-Qur'ānic considerations (a method pioneered by medieval Muslim exegetes) to extra-textual references. This conservative temper has disallowed Bell, who provides a more complex picture of chronology than that which is customary, from having the influence his work deserves, it being somewhat unwieldy and potentially subversive of received ideas. His approach has been "respectfully acknowledged but hardly ever adopted" and, in its attempt to reach a pre-exegetical understanding of the Qur'ān, even compared, rather oddly, to the work of Luxenberg: Wild, "Virgins," 633.

would appear, in principle, to be secondary.[29] It would allow a consequent consideration of an important feature of the Qur'ānic text in its physical rather than purely literary and stylistic character, features which say much about composition as an historically situated process: features such as abrupt pronominal shifts, repetition, interpolation, self-reflexivity and self-reference, abrogation, the frequent lack of firm discursive structure and of continuity between subsequent verses. These could then be seen as literary phenomena, indicators of inner-Qur'ānic restatement, revision, augmentation, amplification, explication, and self-reflexivity more broadly considered, leading to a consideration of some pericopes as having grown with time around their respective nuclei, somehow concentrically, as has been done by Sinai recently with notable success [30] -- always keeping in mind the *Sitz im Leben* of Qur'ānic enunciation. Ultimately, this facilitates the construction of a model for Qur'ānic composition, redaction and canonisation as a complex set of feedback relations between original enunciations (revelation), written redaction, emendation, declamation, reiteration, repetition, expansion, self-reference, and canonisation.

Uncertainties apart, and regardless of the necessity of introducing a variety of revisions in the chronologies that have been suggested, it must be said that the overall skeleton of chronology, deriving from medieval Muslim scholarship and, with many variations, underlying Nöldeke's, and refined by Neuwirth, Sadeghi and others, remains the default mode, although there is often good reason to reposition textual elements as was done by Bell and other scholars. It needs to be kept in mind constantly that such chronologies, some possibly ascertainable, are *grosso modo* relative chronologies, to which whatever events that might be dated could be related. Revisions have reached a systemic critical mass such as to allow a systematic recasting of this overall general scheme proposed by Nöldeke. Ultimately, given Arab literary sources that have been discussed above,

29 Cf. Blachère, *Le Coran*, 1: 250 f., n. 362-4.

30 Sinai, *Fortschreibung*, 77 ff.

and the ever growing mass of archaeological, epigraphic and codicological remains that are likely to prove analytically crucial to interpretations of this theme,[31] and, not least, the text's chronology, the Qur'ān is not a text that might be regarded as one that "stands isolated like an immense rock jutting forth from a desolate sea," making its study in light of other material akin to "attempting to illuminate the Gospels solely from Egyptian papyri and Antiochene inscriptions."[32]

The Qur'ānic text is of course far more than a reservoir of philological problems; its historical interpretation, and the reconstruction of its history, can benefit enormously from the earlier traditions,[33] not least those contained in early, scholiastic exegeses, such as that of Muqātil b. Sulaymān, which tend to be glossatorial and historical, containing much material on Arabian antiquities.[34] Whatever encrustations exegesis may have gathered eventually around the Qur'ānic text, the pre-exegetical text was not, excepting seemingly minor terms, rendered invisible or irretrievable. What is intended here, and what is deemed feasible, is to interpret and use the text without reference to the Islam of later exegesis and dogma, which nevertheless retained very many elements of an earlier, epic time, in a manner discussed above. What is intended is to try to restore to the Qur'ān a pre-exegetical sense.[35]

Such a use, requiring consideration of a *Sitz im Leben* apart from exegetical, scholiastic or properly theological reference, has not been

31 See especially Small, *Textual Criticism*, and Sadeghi and Bergmann, "Codex."

32 Peters, "Quest," 292.

33 Dayeh, "Al-Ḥawāmīm," has made a convincing case for the use of classical Muslim exegetical scholarship in modern study of the Qur'ān.

34 On Muqātil and his reputation, see the Editor's Introduction to MbS, 1:51 ff.; Gilliot, "Muqātil," 50 ff., *TG*, 2:516 ff., and Sinai, *Fortschreibung*, 168 ff. On Muqātil's use of Muslim traditions, on the kinds of traditions he used, and on his tendency to make inner-textual references, see the editor's introduction to MbS, 1:51 ff.

35 In this regard, I would signal the importance of Birkeland, *The Lord*.

attempted often enough. Nöldeke's pioneering textual history is most helpful,[36] but its chronological criteria are much too internal and far too simple. Building upon him and using his findings with impressive subtlety,[37] and in many significant ways going far beyond him and charting a new course more akin to that of Bell, albeit unavowedly, is Sinai's *Fortschreibung*. This could constitute, for all its self-imposed, institutional limits, a virtually new departure in the study of Qur'ānic composition; it examines the internal self-references and rewritings internal to the text itself with a fresh and sharp eye, lettered by comparison with other instances of canonisation. Bell's *Commentary* shows a remarkable sensitivity both to the internal aspects of composition (hence his revisions of chronology in detail) as well as the text's dialectic with the history out of which arose, although certain interpretations can sound quite archaic today.

Finally, recent use of the Qur'ān as an historical-anthropological document, some of whose findings in this regard will prove of invaluable for the study of the text as well as the documentary value of its implicit and explicit references, has been undertaken by Jacqueline Chabbi, who regards the Qur'ān as a source reflecting its time, it being continuously reactive to it.[38] Her reading of it might be termed "stratigraphic," in the sense that it pays meticulous attention to the internal conformation of the text, to its re-reading of itself,[39] always with reference to its *Sitz im Leben*. Chabbi's attention to lexicography and topography is exemplary, and her care to tease

36 It might be noted that, before Nöldeke, Gustav Weil had published a *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in der Koran* in 1844. It might also be noted that, prior to his engagement with the Qur'ānic text, Nöldeke had been engaged with the Higher Criticism of the Old Testament, work largely forgotten after Wellhausen's decisive and most influential moves in this field. See Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 121 f., 176.

37 37 And proferring an eloquent defence of and refinements to that chronology: Sinai, *Heilige Schrift*, ch.3.

38 Chabbi, *Seigneur*, 159 and passim.

39 Chabbi, *Seigneur*, 76 and passim.

out the semantic fields of the Qur'ānic lexicon, as distinct from the familiar routine attention to etymology, makes her work an excellent contribution to historical philology.[40] She does propose a naïve and analytically constricting notion of Arab tribalism;[41] her view that there was a need to tribalise Biblicism in order to adapt it to the Qur'ān is extremely questionable.[42] But this appears as a refrain that does not influence her detailed considerations except in measurable and discernible proportions, although one must signal her occasional over-interpretation of etymologies and, oddly enough, her persistent use of certain interpretative tropes of scholarship now defunct.

40 Peters, review of Chabbi, *Seigneur,* 612. In this respect, her inattention to modern scholarship (noted by Gilliot, review of Chabbi, *Seigneur des tribus*, 186) might be overlooked.

41 Already noted by Robin, review of Chabbi, *Seigneur*, who also noted her neglect of scholarship and of some categories of evidence.

42 Chabbi, *Seigneur*, 407.

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