Concepts of Authorship
in Pre-Modern Arabic Texts

Lale Behzadi, Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila (eds.)

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Christoph Herzog, Birgitt Hoffmann, Lorenz Korn und
Susanne Talabardon

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Authorship in the *Sīra* Literature

Andreas Görke

It has been common to speak of 'authors' and their 'works' in the field of the biography of the Prophet (*sīra* or *maghāzī* literature) for a long time. Josef Horovitz called his well-known study on the origins of this literature 'The Earliest Biographies of the Prophet and Their Authors'[1], and in almost any work dealing with the genre will we encounter these terms.

However, it is apparent that different scholars have different views of how the term is to be used with regard to early Islamic literature. This can be seen for example in the question of who is to be regarded as the first author of a biography of the Prophet. Thus Fuat Sezgin regards figures such as Abān b. ʿUthmān (d. around 95/714 or 105/723), ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 93/712 or 94/713), Shuraḥbīl b. Saʿīd (d. 123/741), and Wahb b. Munabbih (d. ca. 110/728) all as authors,[2] and Salwā Mursī al-Ṭāhir has claimed ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr's work to be "the first *sīra* in Islam".[3] Others would regard Ibn Isḥāq (d. ca. 150/767), who lived two generations later as the first to write a book on the biography of the Prophet,[4] while yet others see the works of al-Wāqidī (d. 207/822), Ibn Hishām (d. ca. 218/834), and Ibn Saʿd (d. 230/845) as "the first to depict the life of Muhammad".[5]

The reason for this disagreement lies in the question of what an author actually is. As we will see, this question is difficult to answer with regard to early Islamic literature in general and the *sīra* literature in particular. The difficulties arise from the character of early Islamic literature, and

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1   Originally published in a series of four articles in the journal *Islamic Culture* in 1927 (pp. 535-59) and 1928 (pp. 22-50, 164-82, 495-526) and now easily accessible in the edition of Lawrence I. Conrad: Horovitz, *The Earliest Biographies of the Prophet and Their Authors*.

2   Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums*, 251, 277f.

3   Mursī al-Ṭāhir, *Bidāyat al-kitāba*. On the work see Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte,* 13, 20.

4   E.g. Jeffery, "The Quest of the Historical Mohammed," 328.

5   Ohlig, "Foreword: Islam's 'Hidden' Origins," 8.

here especially from four features: the compilatory character of the literature mostly being made up of very small textual units of different origin (*akhbār*, sg. *khabar*), the formal requirements of the *khabar*, namely that the narrator is expected to remain absent from the narrative, the significance of the oral element in the transmission of texts, and the character of the *sīra* literature between history, salvation history and fiction, with high importance given to early authorities, ideally eyewitnesses of the events.

What is an Author? Theoretical Considerations

Before we turn to discuss authorship in the *sīra* literature, we need to address the question of what makes an author an author. So far little research has been done on the concept of authorship and its development in Arabic or Islamic literature, and we will have to rely at least partly on studies dealing with authorship in a European context and then consider to what extent they can be applied to Islamic literature.

When we look at definitions of the term author, they usually focus on individuals. Thus Martha Woodmansee has summarised a common notion of the term as follows: "an author is an individual who is solely responsible – and therefore exclusively deserving of credit – for the production of a unique work."[6] Andrew Bennett put it in similar terms: "This common-sense notion of the author involves the idea of an individual (singular) who is responsible for or who originates, who writes or composes a (literary) text and who is thereby considered an inventor or founder and who [...] is thought to have certain ownership rights over the text as well as a certain authority over its interpretation."[7]

Both definitions emphasise the individual character of an author and his responsibility for some kind of work. We would usually consider this work to be a written text – a book, an article or some other document – and see the author as the person who is responsible for its contents and

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6   Woodmansee, "The Genius and the Copyright," 426. In her book *The Author, Art and the Market*, 35, she adds the notion of 'original' to characterise the work.

7   Bennett, *The Author*, 7.

its wording. Usually, we would also assume that authorship involves some form of creativity, authority or originality.[8]

Over the last decades, this idea of an individual and original authorship has been shown to be a fairly recent concept, emerging only in the eighteenth century. The English word 'author' is derived from the medieval term *auctor*, which is derived from the Latin verbs *agere* ('to act' or 'to perform'), *augere* ('to make grow', 'originate', 'promote', or 'increase'), and *auieo* ('to tie together', namely verses with feet and metres).[9] In late antiquity and in medieval times, the idea of *auctoritas*, implying both authority and authenticity, was central in the discussion of texts; a text could only be 'authentic' when it had been produced by a named *auctor*, while works of unknown authorship were regarded as apocryphal and had far less *auctoritas*. To dispute an attribution and thus deprive a work of its *auctor* was therefore regarded as a severe step. On the other hand, it was not uncommon to attribute popular works to known authorities rather than their actual later writers as the latter did not possess the same *auctoritas*.[10] Each discipline had its own *auctores*, its renowned authorities, and the study of their texts remained the basis of the educational system until the fifteenth century.[11] With the discovery of the New World, however, things changed, as the new discoveries could not be explained or described by relying on the ancient authorities. In line with developments in other fields that started to break with tradition at this time, a new concept of the author emerged, where the author was less dependent on earlier authorities but could himself claim authority for his own words.[12] He was nevertheless basically a craftsman who followed specific rules and techniques. Only later the idea of the individual genius

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8 Pease, "Author," 105.

9 Minnis, *Medieval Theory*, 10. Pease, "Author," 106. The Greek derivation suggested by Minnis and Pease seems to be problematic. Cf. Seng, "Autor," 1276. I wish to thank Prof. Dr. Lale Behzadi and Prof. Dr. Sabine Vogt for making me aware of this.

10 Minnis, *Medieval Theory*, 11–12.

11 Ibid. 13. Pease, "Author," 106.

12 Pease, "Author," 107–108.

emerged, who transcended ordinary culture and was only bound by his creative imagination.[13]

It is obvious already from this brief glimpse into the history of the concept of authorship that our modern understanding of author is not necessarily applicable to pre-modern literature, and in fact that some of the implied characteristics do not necessarily apply to all modern works either. Jack Stillinger, for instance, has challenged the idea of the author as a solitary genius and has provided numerous examples for – unacknowledged – multiple authorship.[14] He concluded that "multiple authorship is a frequently occurring phenomenon, one of the routine ways of producing literature all along"[15] and that we need to reconsider our theories of authorship to accommodate this fact. In the *sīra* literature, multiple authorship – in the sense of a large number of persons involved in the production of a text – is the rule.[16]

Not everyone involved in the production of a text would necessarily be regarded as an author. The thirteenth-century Franciscan monk St. Bonaventure distinguished four different ways of making a book and specified the roles or functions involved in these. A scribe (*scriptor*), according to this classification, is someone who "writes others' words, adding nothing and changing nothing". A compiler (*compilator*) puts together "passages which are not his own". A commentator (*commentator*) "writes both others' words and his own, but with the others' words in prime place and his own only added for purposes of clarification". And finally an author (*auctor*) "writes both his own words and others', but with his own in prime place and others' added only for purposes of confirmation".[17]

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13 Ibid. 108–109.

14 Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship*.

15 Ibid. 201.

16 Leder, *Das Korpus*, 283, with regard to Islamic compilatory literature as a whole.

17 Burrow, *Medieval Writers and Their Work*, 29–30.

Authorship in the Arabic-Islamic Literature

When we turn to the Arabic-Islamic literature, we can notice that the terms used with regard to authorship have a different etymology and history as well as different connotations and associations than their Latin counterparts. The most common Arabic term used to denote an author is *mu'allif*. The verb *allafa* means to bring together, to collect or to unite.[18] A second common term is *muṣannif*. The corresponding verb, *ṣannafa*, in general signifies to assort, to separate or to distinguish different parts.[19] As we can see, connotations here are less focused on authority or the act of creating something new but rather on compiling and bringing into order. Thus the perception of what a *mu'allif* or *muṣannif* does should be different from that of an 'author'. Like in medieval Europe, however, the *mu'allif* or *muṣannif* was not the only person involved in the production of a book; other important professions were that of the scribe or copyist (*warrāq* or *nassākh*)[20] and possibly of a famulus dictating a work (*mustamlī*).[21]

In many cases the terminology used in the literature does not indicate the activity of the people involved in the production of the text, but rather focuses on the existence of some form of writing. Thus Ibn al-Nadīm in his *Fihrist* frequently says *lahu min al-kutub* (to him belong [the following] books), or that someone is the *ṣāḥib* (literally the lord, master, possessor, or owner) of a book. Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī distinguishes between *kutub li-fulān* and *kutub 'an fulān*, possibly implying by the first phrase that the work in question was given its final form by the person mentioned, while in the second case indicating that the work was compiled by later editors but was based on the named person's materials.[22] *Kitāb*, however, does not necessarily refer to a book but can denote any piece of writing, including notes or aide-memoires, as the root *kataba* only refers

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18 Cf. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v. '-l-f.

19 Cf. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v. ṣ-n-f.

20 Pedersen, *The Arabic Book*, 43–51.

21 Ibid. 26. Weisweiler, "Das Amt des Mustamlī in der arabischen Wissenschaft."

22 Görke, *Das Kitāb al-Amwāl*, 3.

to the act of writing down.[23] The noun *kātib* (someone who writes) would rather be used for secretaries and need not involve any creative act.

If we compare the terms used in the Arabic-Islamic literature to medieval European concepts, we may find some correspondence between the terms *warrāq* or *nassākh* and the *scriptor* of Bonaventure's classification. Some parallels may likewise be seen between the term *compilator* and its Arabic counterparts *mu'allif* or *muṣannif*, but the latter terms are usually used in a much broader sense. In later Islamic literature, we also find commentaries (*sharḥ*) of books and thus could find parallels to Bonaventure's *commentator*. But there is no Arabic term that is similar in scope to his *auctor*.

The Character of the *Sīra* Literature

The major problem when discussing authorship in the *sīra* literature, however, is not the question of terminology, but rather what the people credited with the production of works did actually do. To answer this question, let us have a look at the literature and the features that define what 'authorship' in this literature can mean.

Sīra literature can best be described as a mixture between historiography, salvation history and fictional narration. Some of the narratives clearly establish links to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Thus the story of Muḥammad's grandfather vowing to sacrifice his son 'Abdallāh, and God eventually accepting 100 camels as a sacrifice instead,[24] evokes the story of Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son,[25] and the story of the annunciation of Muḥammad's birth to his mother Āmina[26] has parallels to the annunciation of Jesus' birth to Mary.[27] Other parts of the *sīra* seem to be modelled on the lives of Moses or David.[28] The *sīra* also abounds in miracle stories that show how Muḥammad is protected and guided by God

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23   Sellheim, "Kitāb," 207.

24   Cf. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 66-68.

25   Gen 22:1-19.

26   Cf. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 69.

27   Lk 1:26-38.

28   Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder*, 189–214. Maghen, "Davidic Motifs."

and is heir to the previous prophets. Some parts like for instance the story of Muḥammad's night journey and ascent to heaven (*isrā'* and *miʿrāj*) consist of carefully composed narratives that have more of a fictional than of a historical character. Other parts of the *sīra* appear to be more interested in establishing factual accounts of what really happened. It can be shown that in general factual traditions are transmitted more faithfully than fictional narratives, but as different cultures have different concepts of truth and history,[29] we should not regard these categories as necessarily exclusive but rather conceive them as two sides of a continuum.[30] The character of the *sīra* literature thus draws some limits to the freedom of creating, shaping and presenting the material, but still allows for some room to form and develop narratives as long as they can be considered to be more or less reliable representations of what was conceived to be history.

A second important feature of the *sīra* literature is its compilatory character. Almost all early Islamic works dealing with the biography of the Prophet are compilations that bring together different kinds of materials such as narratives about single events, poetry, lists, Qur'anic verses and elaborations thereof, and others. As compilations rely on the existence of earlier material – which may at least in part already have been fixed in wording – the question arises to what extent the compiler of a work can be regarded as responsible for the text. Here the difference between the notions of *mu'allif* or *muṣannif* and our understanding of the term 'author' becomes very apparent, with the Arabic terms putting more emphasis on the arrangement of the material and less on the originality or authority over the text.

The main part of these compilations consists of reports about single events in the life of Muḥammad. These reports mostly come in the style of *akhbār*, of seemingly factual reports, usually made up of several elements that are loosely fit together. They are mostly furnished with an *isnād*, a chain of authorities comprising several names and going back to

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29 Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 13–14.
30 Hoyland, "History, fiction, and authorship," 18.

an eyewitness or a prominent early scholar. While this *isnād* is supposed to guarantee the authenticity of the text, it does not indicate which transformation the text underwent in the process of transmission.[31] The narrator himself is usually completely absent from the narration.[32] The style of the *akhbār* lends itself to abridgements or additions; as it is usually composed of only very loosely connected passages, the omission or addition of parts or the restructuring of the *khabar* does not cause major breaks and often cannot be noticed unless several variants are compared.[33] This style thus facilitates the deliberate shaping of the material but also easily leads to inadvertent changes and needs to be considered as a third defining feature of the *sīra* literature when we consider the question of authorship.

Finally, and closely linked to the features above is the importance of the oral element in the early transmission of the *sīra* material. Most of the material was passed on orally for at least two or three generations, and the process from oral to written transmission took place gradually.[34] As it is often impossible to identify exactly when and in which context or milieu a tradition originally emerged, and as there is no fixed text, it is difficult to speak of authorship with regard to oral traditions.[35]

These features thus provide some explanation why the question of authorship in the *sīra* literature has remained controversial. Similar observations of course apply in other fields of early Islamic literature, such as *ḥadīth* or historiography, to which the *sīra* is linked. Trying to account for the aspect of originality, Stefan Leder used the term author with regard to narrations that are only preserved in later adaptations, but where an

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31 Leder, *Das Korpus*, 11–12, 111.

32 Ibid. 176. Hoyland, "History, fiction, and authorship," 22. Leder and Kilpatrick, "Classical Arabic Prose Literature," 11. Leder, "The Literary Use of the *Khabar*," 307. Cf. Beaumont, "Hard-Boiled: Narrative Discourse in Early Muslim Traditions," 13–15, 26.

33 Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 153–155. Leder, "The Use of Composite Form," 128–129. Id. "Authorship and Transmission in Unauthored Literature," 67.

34 See the detailed discussion in Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*, in particular 28–61, 111–141. Id. *Charakter und Authentie*, 53–58.

35 Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 54–56.

individual's creativity in the narrative structure and plot can still be recognised.[36] And Harald Motzki spoke of authors in the sense that they taught almost all the material transmitted in their name, although the arrangement of the material is owed to their students.[37]

The explanatory value of the term 'author' seems limited when so divergent concepts of the term are used. It nevertheless remains important to identify who is responsible for a text, if we are to use it as a historical source. A text may often tell us more about the time in which it was produced than about the time to which it refers, but in order to draw conclusions to the first, it is necessary to establish who has actually shaped the text and when. The question of authorship thus cannot be neglected.

Rather than following a specific definition of 'author' and then determining who would qualify as an author according to that definition, in the following we want to discuss the role of the different people who were involved in the production of *sīra* texts. This compilatory character of the literature makes it necessary to distinguish between two different aspects: the role of the persons involved in the composition and elaboration of the single narratives on the one hand, and those responsible for the composition of compilations in which these single narratives are included on the other hand.[38] The latter may rely on fixed texts, but can also be involved in the careful recasting of the narratives they include in their works, while the former may only be involved in the creation, transmission and transformation of unconnected narratives, but could at the same time compose works of their own using these narratives.

The Emergence and Transformation of Narratives on the Life of Muḥammad

Let us first have a look at the single narratives which are furnished with an *isnād*. There have been several attempts to closer define the roles of

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36 Leder, "Features of the Novel in Early Historiography," 74, 96.

37 Motzki, "The Author and his Work in the Islamic Literature of the First Centuries," 193–196.

38 Leder/Kilpatrick, "Classical Arabic Prose Literature," 18. Leder, "Authorship and Transmission in Unauthored Literature," 81.

the persons who figure in the *isnād* and distinguish them from each other. Different terms have been used and partly coined with this aim, including informant, guarantor, original reporter, common link, originator, collector, transmitter, or author, but they have not been used consistently.[39] Sebastian Günther has recently tried to systematise these and other terms according to different categories such as the technical function of a person in the transmission, his significance for a later compiler and his contribution to the consolidation and fixing of the transmitted material.[40] However, these categories often overlap and do not necessarily tell us much about the individual's role in the shaping of the text.

One method that can help us to understand the different roles and functions of the various people who feature in the *isnād* is the *isnād-cum-matn* analysis, mostly used for reconstructing the earliest layers of a tradition. To get reliable results it is necessary to have a large number of variant versions of a tradition, but given that there are enough variants, the method can be used to determine the roles of the persons involved in the shaping, transmission and spread of the tradition. Thus, for instance, when all students of a certain authority except for one transmit a similar story and only in the version of one student additional elements can be found, it is likely that these elements were introduced by this student. Likewise if all students relate the same story and only in one version some of the elements seem to be missing, it is likely that these are omissions and can be attributed to the student transmitting this version. The same considerations apply for the structure of the narrative or the wording. Conclusions gained by this method are in general provisional. In many cases, for instance, it cannot be ruled out that one transmitter spread different versions at different times. But if some pattern recurs in several traditions with the same transmitter, this makes it more likely that he is indeed responsible for the changes.

There have been several studies focusing on the development of single narratives in the course of their transmission, both in the field of the bi-

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39 Günther, "Assessing the Sources of Classical Arabic Compilations," 82–83.
40 Günther, "Assessing the Sources of Classical Arabic Compilations," 84–89.

ography of the Prophet and related fields, such as history or *ḥadīth*. This gives us a good idea of the changes that typically occur in the transmission of these narratives. The following is an attempt to explain in general terms how narratives on the life of the Prophet emerged and changed during the course of transmission until they eventually become fixed and stable texts.

First Generation: (alleged) Eye Witnesses

So far it has not been possible to securely trace back any narrative about the life of Muḥammad to a Companion of the Prophet. Several reports in the *sīra* do not claim to go back to an eyewitness but only to a Successor. Quite often, only in some versions is a report traced back to an alleged eyewitness, while in others the Successor is given as the first source.[41] It is therefore possible that the alleged eyewitnesses were only inserted at some point of the narration to make it appear more reliable, although it cannot be ruled out that the named persons indeed were the sources of information for the following generation. The information passed on at this stage will mostly have been reminiscences, personal recollections of past events.[42] While the memories of the events will have been important for the participants, they did not at this stage lead to any collective vision of the history which was relevant for the whole community.[43] Thus, as a rule these accounts will not have any connection to one another, and they may often be in disagreement about what happened.

Second Generation (Successors, active between ca. 60/680 and 110/728)

This appears to be the time when the first longer narratives about the life of the Prophet were composed, probably by taking together some reports and forming them into a narrative. These seem to be narratives of single

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41 Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 16-17, 34, 193, 255-256.
42 On reminiscences as basis for oral history, see Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 8–10.
43 Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 138–139.

events, not yet coherent accounts of the life of Muḥammad.[44] There is only little evidence of use of the Qur'an as a source for these narratives at this time. They are likely to be at least partially based on the memories and recollections of some of the people involved. Many of them do, however, contain miracle stories or legendary elements, and they convey a partly transfigured image of Muḥammad. These narratives should be distinguished from stories that about the same time, possibly already slightly earlier, were created by professional storytellers (quṣṣāṣ, sg. qāṣṣ) drawing on a certain repertoire of motives and narrative styles and that were mainly intended for entertainment and edification.[45] Although originally distinct genres, two generations later people like Ibn Isḥāq (d. 150/767) and Mūsā b. 'Uqba (d. 141/758) draw on both types of narrations,[46] and in the further course of transmission, some of these popular stories seem to get transformed into khabar of the first type.[47]

It is instructive to see that these first longer narratives appear at the same time that sees a developing Islamic self-image in other areas as well, such as the coinage reform under the caliph 'Abd al-Malik. This may indicate that these narratives were created as response to a growing need for a distinctly Islamic identity. The figures active at this time – among the more prominent were 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 93/712 or 94/713), Sa'īd b. al-Musayyab (d. 94/713), and Abān b. 'Uthmān (d. around 95/714 or 105/723) – did not write books; if they had any written records at all, these would be nothing more than aide-memoires or notebooks. They nevertheless were important in shaping the traditions about Muḥammad's life. Without written accounts and without a chronological framework, they should not be regarded as historians, but rather may be seen as a kind of encyclopaedic informants who collected a large amount of knowledge about the past and were the primary source

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44 See Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 266-267, and Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 23-24 for assessments regarding the traditions of 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr.

45 Hoyland, "History, fiction, and authorship," 23–24. Leder/Kilpatrick, "Classical Arabic Prose Literature," 14. Görke/Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 268, 270, 276–278.

46 Ibid. 275–276.

47 Beaumont, "Hard-Boiled: Narrative Discourse in Early Muslim traditions," 21–22.

of information for the next generation.[48] They are *akhbārī*s in the sense that they combined different, originally distinct accounts and reminiscences into a coherent narrative, a practice which the emerging *ḥadīth* criticism regarded as problematic.[49] It is this and the next two generations who ultimately define what is worth remembering about the life of Muḥammad.

Third Generation (active between ca. 80/699 and 130/748)

In the third generation, we can observe two main mechanisms at work: the creation of new narratives, and the transmission and recasting of existing narratives. New narratives are created similar to the process we have seen in the second generation. They are formed out of reminiscences that have been passed down in families and of an evolving tradition about events that became to be regarded as significant. On the other hand, existing narratives are transmitted and in the course of this transmission are carefully recast. The changes made at this stage always include a rephrasing (due to the fact that the traditions at this stage are mostly transmitted orally the text of the traditions is not fixed), but usually also involve a restructuring, the narrative enhancement of the story, and the addition of further elements. Part of this is apparently the attempt to reconcile different narratives, to link narratives to each other, or to make connections to verses of the Qur'an or to poetry, where relevant. While the conflation of different accounts into a single one apparently originated in the generation prior to this,[50] the practice becomes more widespread now, as a larger number of already developed narratives are transmitted.[51]

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48 On encyclopaedic informants and their reliability as sources see Hartwig, "Oral traditions." Pender-Cudlip, "Encyclopedic Informants," 200–202, 209–210. Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 190–192. Id. *Oral Tradition as History*, 39.

49 Hoyland, "History, fiction, and authorship," 20. Görke, "The relationship between *maghāzī* and *ḥadīth*," 174–176.

50 Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 74–77, 266–267.

51 Al-Dūrī, *The Rise of Historical Writing*, 29. Lecker, "Wāqidī's account," 19–20. Görke, "The relationship between *maghāzī* and *ḥadīth*," 176.

The reworking of narratives in this and the following generation needs also to be understood against the background of the transformation of personal narratives into group accounts. Those involved in the collection, combination and transmission of these accounts passed them on because they deemed them relevant. But they were relevant for them for other reasons than they were for their informants. Reminiscences and personal accounts that were passed on in families will have served among other things to glorify their own forefathers and explain family traditions. They are thus often conflicting and irreconcilable with other accounts.[52] Those who were later to be regarded as the early authorities on the *sīra* had to reconcile these different personal accounts, however, and, more importantly, they had to decide which traditions were significant and relevant in order to understand the early history of the community, as this was the main reason to prevent traditions from falling into oblivion. Only those traditions that were in some way relevant for the community would be remembered and passed down, and changes in the society were likely to be reflected through the adaptation of the traditions.[53]

In this generation, we can also see the emergence of a chronological framework,[54] and at least some of the persons active at this time put down their narrations in writing and thereby contributed to the fixation of the texts.[55] The establishment of a chronological framework can be seen as a movement towards historiography, as dates and a coherent dating scheme are essential to history and distinguish it from myth and epic.[56] Among the best known representatives of this time are ʿĀṣim b. ʿUmar b. Qatāda (d. ca. 120/738), Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742), and ʿAbdallāh b. Abī Bakr b. Muḥammad (d. ca. 130/748).

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52 See Landau-Tasseron, "Processes of Redaction," 257–259 for examples.

53 See Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 19–21, for an example of the transition of personal accounts to group accounts.

54 Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 271–272. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 232.

55 Schoeler, *The Genesis*, 47–50. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 206. Boekhoff-van der Voort, *Between history and legend*, 344-345.

56 Finley, "Myth, Memory, and History," 284–285.

Fourth Generation (active between ca. 120/738 and 160/777)

While some of the narrations were written down in the third generation, the production of actual books combining several narratives begins in the fourth generation. We will deal with the compilation process below, but the emergence of books contributes significantly to the stabilisation of the texts of the single narratives. The most famous representatives of this generation are Mūsā b. ʿUqba (d. 141/758), Ibn Isḥāq (d. 150/767) and Maʿmar b. Rāshid (d. 153/770). Although it can be shown that they partly relied on written material passed down from the prior generation, at least some of them still used this material freely and continued to adapt the narrations. The extent of this reworking seems to be at least in part dependent on the type of work in which the narratives are included. As shown elsewhere,[57] the works that emerge at this time are of two types: on the one hand, independent works are created that are mainly devoted to the biography of Muḥammad and try to create a coherent narrative of his life. The works of Ibn Isḥāq and Mūsā b. ʿUqba can be regarded as the earliest representatives of this type of work, which we may call independent *sīra* works. On the other hand, the single narratives about Muḥammad's life are collected in chapters on *maghāzī* in larger *ḥadīth* collections without connecting them to each other. The work of Maʿmar b. Rāshid appears to have been of this type. These different approaches also have an impact on the text of the narratives. Thus it is very likely that those who like Maʿmar b. Rāshid kept the narrations separate – thereby conforming to the demands of the *ḥadīth* scholars – were also more faithful in transmitting the texts and did not actively shape the traditions. An indication of this may be that variants of traditions transmitted among *ḥadīth* scholars appear to be much closer to each other than to the same traditions transmitted by *sīra* scholars.[58] Those who like Mūsā b. ʿUqba and Ibn Isḥāq produced coherent narratives, on the other hand, can be shown to consciously rework the material they receive.[59]

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57 Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 273–278.

58 Ibid. 26, 55–56, 62–63, 128.

59 Leder, "The Use of Composite Form," 132–139; Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie*, 142–143. Görke et al. "First Century Sources," 11–15.

Fifth and Sixth Generations (active between ca. 150/767 and 260/874)

In these generations most of the narratives that were shaped by the pre-vious generations become fixed texts and are published in various inde-pendent works and collections. Partly these are *ḥadīth* collections, such as the works of ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī (d. 211/827), Ibn Abī Shayba (d. 235/849), Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), or al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870). Other works are specifically devoted to the biography of Muḥammad, such as al-Wāqidī's (d. 207/823) *Maghāzī*, Ibn Hishām's (d. 218/833) *Sīra* or the first two volumes of Ibn Saʿd's (d. 230/845) *Ṭabaqāt*. There are still variants between different versions of the same traditions that were transmitted from scholars of the fourth generation, partly due to the character and transmission of the works from that generation (see below). However, these variants now become fixed and are regarded as different versions of the same text. We can also still see a process of con-scious recasting and combining different narratives into one by some scholars, such as al-Wāqidī and Ibn Saʿd, sometimes probably in an at-tempt to systematise and make sense of the reports handed down.[60]

Later Generations (after around 260/874)

From around the middle of the 3rd century of Islam, the wording of the individual traditions does not seem to change much anymore. The texts are fixed and the sources in which they can be found are available. As a rule, later compilers, when they refer to earlier authorities, do not change the wording but mostly remain faithful to the text. They may, however, only quote part of a tradition and juxtapose it with others. In some cases they freely summarise a tradition.

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60 See e.g. Landau-Tasseron, "Processes of Redaction," in particular 261–263, 270. Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 56–58, 212–215.

The Creation of Works

We have seen that some persons in the second and third generation after the Prophet seem to have put down in writing the traditions they taught. However, these written texts cannot be considered real books. They were of various character, comprising simple notes, detailed draft notes or notebooks intended for teaching, and official collections for the exclusive use of the caliphal court.[61] The creation of real works on the life of Muḥammad only begins in the fourth generation with scholars such as Ibn Isḥāq, Mūsā b. ʿUqba, and Maʿmar b. Rāshid.[62] These scholars partly rely on earlier written material, but unlike their predecessors they organise their material according to chronological considerations.[63] We have already seen that they took two different approaches in dealing with the material, either producing chapters on *maghāzī* within larger *ḥadīth* collections (which, however, could also be transmitted independently), or creating comprehensive *sīra* or *maghāzī* works. While the first type can best be described as a thematically and chronologically arranged selection of single narratives, the second type offers much more room for 'authorial' activity. Thus there are frequent summaries, connecting passages and commentaries that link the material together and contribute to a coherent narrative of the life of Muḥammad. In contrast to the first type, works of the second type often also include additional material which is not transmitted with *isnād*s, such as poetry, list of participants, documents, stories by storytellers and verses of the Qur'an.

Both types of works are still mostly confined to teaching and are not intended for a broader readership. They are often only put to writing by the compilers' students, which leads to different recensions. There are for instance so many different versions of Ibn Isḥāq's text – transmitted by different students of his – that it is impossible to reconstruct a definite

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61 Schoeler, *The Genesis*, 49–50.
62 Cf. Jones, "The Maghāzī Literature," 347. Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 273–278.
63 Cf. Jones, "The Maghāzī Literature," 349. Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 273, 277.

version of his book.[64] While there are some passages that are more or less identical in wording and thus can be assumed to reflect Ibn Isḥāq's original text, other passages differ substantially. In the transmission of these works, differences could occur by the teacher presenting his material differently in different lectures, the students producing different written records and these students in turn transmitting the material differently.[65] Apparently, the following generations did not consider these works to be closed texts that could not be amended or changed. This only changes with the works of Ibn Hishām and al-Bukhārī, which also generate commentaries and were thus obviously conceived as fixed and complete texts.[66]

From the middle of the third century, the production of real books in the sense of closed texts becomes the rule. We can distinguish four major kinds of works, in which narratives about the life of Muḥammad feature: a) *sīra* works in the narrower meaning of the sense, devoted to depicting the life of Muḥammad in a more or less coherent narrative; b) universal histories that devote some chapters or volumes to the life of Muḥammad; c) works discussing some aspects of the life of Muḥammad, such as the proofs of his prophethood (*dalā'il al-nubuwwa*); and d) *ḥadīh* collections. In addition to these four types, individual traditions can be found in other works, such as legal works or commentaries of the Qur'an (e). They are for instance used to elucidate passages of the Qur'an or as examples of the Prophet's practice.

As we have seen, the scholars composing these works had more or less fixed texts at their disposal that had been shaped over the previous generations. On the one hand they could draw on single narratives, often in several different versions, on the other hand these narratives had been put in specific contexts, with comments by earlier scholars and additional material. Even without making significant changes to the single texts that were passed down from previous generations, they could fol-

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64 Al-Samuk, *Die historischen Überlieferungen,* 80, 162. Muranyi, "Ibn Isḥāq's *K. al-Maghāzī,*" 269.

65 Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*, 33, 45.

66 Leder and Kilpatrick, "Classical Arabic Prose Literature," 24.

low an agenda of their own by using different compilatory techniques and strategies. Fred Donner has recently identified four such strategies in his study of Ibn ʿAsākir's handling of his material on the caliph ʿUthmān, namely the strategies of selection, placement, repetition, and manipulation.[67] Carl Brockelmann, in his comparison of Ibn al-Athīr's work to his main source and model, the history of al-Ṭabarī, had observed several techniques at work, among them the reduction of redundancy through omission, the harmonisation of different traditions into one, the filling of gaps from other sources, the inclusion of comments to explain circumstances that were no longer familiar to his audience and the adaptation of vocabulary and style to the conventions and customs of his time.[68]

We can observe almost all of these techniques and strategies being employed in works including narratives about the life of Muḥammad from the third century onwards. While the extent to which these techniques were used has to be established in every single case, some general observation can be made with regard to the different types of works in which these narratives figure. In general, those works which only quote single narratives to elucidate passages of the Qur'an or to use them to argue for a legal point (e) often quote only a relevant passage from the longer narratives; they may sometimes only give a paraphrase. In *ḥadīth* collections (d), the narratives usually are reproduced from earlier sources without significant changes. They may be considerably shortened, however, depending on the chapter in which they are included. In these cases, the most important strategy consists in the selection of the material, and possibly its placement.

With regard to the other types of works, the processes are more complex. There are works that tell the life of Muḥammad in a more or less coherent narrative, following the models of Ibn Isḥāq, Mūsā b. ʿUqba and al-Wāqidī. While some of these works are confined to the life of Muḥammad (a), more often Muḥammad's biography is discussed within univer-

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67 Donner, "ʿUthmān and the Rāshidūn Caliphs," 47 and *passim*.
68 Brockelmann, *Das Verhältnis,* 3-20. See also Franz, *Kompilation in Arabischen Chroniken,* 4.

sal histories (b). These works again can be divided into two types. One type quotes extensively from previous works (of which different recensions may have been available), both of the independent *sīra* type (such as Ibn Isḥāq, Mūsā b. ʿUqba, and al-Wāqidī) and of the *ḥadīth* collection type (such as Maʿmar, ʿAbd al-Razzāq, Ibn Abī Shayba, and al-Bukhārī). The authors or compilers of these books use different techniques in presenting their material. They make a selection from the numerous accounts that are available to them. They sometimes juxtapose different accounts, often quoting only passages from longer narratives, and they sometimes comment on the differences between the accounts, either trying to reconcile them or explaining why one version seems to be more reliable than the other. They may also include *ḥadīth*s that were previously used in legal or exegetical debates and thereby widen the scope of the material included. Some, like Ibn Sayyid al-Nās (d. 734/1334), seem to put more focus on a coherent narrative; they present fewer variants and allow less room for the discussion of the different accounts. Others, like Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), include more variants, more additional material, and they devote more room to comments on the material they present. Other representatives of this kind of work include the history of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and the volumes on the biography of the Prophet in al-Dhahabī's (d. 748/1348) history of Islam. All these works make use of a wide array of the different techniques and strategies of compilation.

The second type of works that cover the entire life of Muḥammad may likewise rely on earlier literature, but they mostly do not quote earlier works explicitly, but rather retell the biography of Muḥammad in one coherent narrative. Examples of this type of work are the histories of al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 284/897), al-Masʿūdī (d. 345/956), and Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233). Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr's (d. 463/1073) summary of the life of the Prophet, *al-Durar fī khtiṣār al-maghāzī wa-l-siyar,* has a similar approach. The relationship between these works and the earlier sources from which they draw their material is yet to be studied. It is apparent that this approach allows for more authorial freedom, as the authors of these works not only choose which events to include and which traditions to follow, but they are also not bound by the established wording of the ac-

counts but can rephrase and summarise their sources. Others use even more poetic licence and for instance retell events of the life of Muḥammad in verse.[69]

In addition to these works which cover the life of Muḥammad, there are numerous works which incorporate a significant account of traditions on his life, but do not attempt to create a coherent narrative in chronological order, but rather focus on different aspects of Muḥammad's life such as the proofs of his prophethood (*dalā'il al-nubuwwa*) (c). When they quote their sources – which again usually are the major works of the second and third centuries –, they show a similar range of sources used and discussion of variants as we can find in the historical works. Some quote only one or a few traditions for an event, others quote several variants and discuss the differences. We thus find the same techniques at work – a selection of the topics to include, a selection of the traditions to quote, a possible emphasis through the order and repetition of sources and the inclusion of their own commentaries.

Despite these general observations, the extent to which different compilers used the various techniques to present the material varies considerably and needs to be studied in every individual case. Kurt Franz in his study of different compilations and their presentation of the Zanj rebellion identified three types of compilations, which can serve as a model for compilations in the *sīra* literature as well:[70] readaptations, which show an individual character that clearly distinguishes them from their models and sources; collections or epitomes, which differ from their sources in the considerable reduction of the material, without, however, producing an independent text; and copies which simply reproduce a text without any major modifications. While the first two models can be applied both to complete works and to individual narratives or larger topics, the last category only refers to the latter and can for instance be seen in *ḥadīth* collections.

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69   See Arberry, "The Sīra in Verse" for some examples.
70   Franz, *Kompilation in arabischen Chroniken*, 269–270.

Conclusion

From the very beginning, *sīra* literature can be regarded as an example of multiple authorship with a large number of persons involved in the production of any text. This applies on the one hand to the development of the single narratives about any given event. These traditions, mostly created in the second or third generation after Muḥammad's death from alleged reminiscences from eyewitnesses but also from edifying stories of professional storytellers are refined, embellished, rephrased, rearranged, shortened, extended with new materials or combined with other traditions in the course of the transmission over the next generations. Despite all these changes, the transmitters usually retain the core of the tradition, the basic story.[71] If enough variants of a tradition have been recorded in the sources, it is often possible to find out who is responsible for which elements in a specific variant with regard to form, content, the addition or omission of material and sometimes the wording. Several of the individuals involved in the transmission of the text may have placed them in the context of a larger, more or less fixed work. However, the tradition retains its independent character and it or parts of it can be used in other contexts in later works. In this regard, when speaking of traditions in the *sīra* it is helpful to also reference the *isnād*, the chain of authorities, which credits many of the main figures involved in the shaping of a tradition.

On the other hand, we have to look at the production of larger works incorporating these traditions. These can be of very different character, of which some include only individual traditions while others produce coherent narratives of the life of Muḥammad or on aspects of his life. These works can be based mostly or completely on existing written traditions which are only rearranged, but they can likewise modify these traditions, add new ones, and comment on them.

When we take together the developments of the traditions and the development of the works, we can distinguish three main phases:

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71 Hoyland, "History, fiction, and authorship," 33. Leder, "The Use of Composite Form," 144.

First phase: from about 60/680 to about 130/737. In this phase, there are no compilations that discuss the life of Muḥammad as a whole, but only narratives that relate to some episodes of his life. The traditions are mostly passed on orally or based on some notes, and there is no fixed text. Transmitters adapt and recast the traditions, enhance the narrative, add new material, omit other material, combine different narratives into one, start to make connections to the Qur'an and restructure the narratives they receive. However, they usually retain the core of the narratives, which, whether historical or not, can often be traced back to the generation of the followers (*tābiʿūn*).

Second phase: from about 130/737 to about 230/845. In this phase, compilations emerge that combine several narrations and aim to cover more or less the whole life of Muḥammad (or part of it, as in the case of al-Wāqidī, who confined himself to events after the *hijra*). Two different types of these compilations develop. One of these keeps the narratives separate and does not try to create a coherent account of Muḥammad's life, as can be seen for instance in the collection of Maʿmar b. Rāshid that was incorporated in ʿAbd al-Razzāq's *Muṣannaf*. Others try to create a coherent account by linking the narratives and providing a consistent time frame as can be seen in the works of Ibn Isḥāq, Mūsā b. ʿUqba and al-Wāqidī.[72] The narratives included in these works are not yet fixed and are still object to adaptation and recasting, addition, omission and re-structuring, although to a lesser degree than in the first phase. They do, however, become stabilised in different variants through the inclusion in these works.

Third phase: after about 230/845. In this phase, there are fewer changes to the texts of the narratives themselves. There may be omissions, but in general the text is taken over more or less verbatim from the main authorities of the second phase such as Ibn Isḥāq, Maʿmar b. Rāshid, Mūsā b. ʿUqba, and al-Wāqidī. The narratives may, however, be placed in a different context, split up in several parts or juxtaposed with other narratives. Examples for this can be seen in al-Ṭabarī's history and his com-

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72 Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 273–278.

mentary of the Qur'an, where the same narrative can be used for different purposes, the chapter on the *maghāzī* in al-Bukhārī's *ḥadīth* collection, or the biographies of the Prophet by Ibn Kathīr or Ibn Sayyid al-Nās.

In all phases we can identify single persons who are responsible for some part of the final texts we see. In some cases we can establish who initially created a narrative, who was responsible for its careful development and narrative enhancement, who made connections to verses of the Qur'an or combined different narratives into one, who first wrote down the narrative and therefore more or less fixed its text, who placed the narrative in a coherent chronology of the life of the Prophet and who may later have called this into question and provided a different context. All these contributions involve some form of originality and creative effort.

With regard to the question of who can be regarded as an author in the *sīra* literature, there thus is no objective answer. The answer rather depends on our understanding of what makes an author an author. Several different criteria are feasible, among them the responsibility for the contents of a text, the responsibility for its form and structure, the responsibility for its context, and the responsibility for its wording. Other criteria could be the creativity or originality in the production of a text, the creation of a written text, or the creation of a closed text.

In the *sīra* literature we would usually find those who are responsible for the *contents*, *form* and *structure* of the single narratives about Muḥammad's life in the second to fourth generations after Muḥammad's death. Those responsible for the *wording* of the single narratives mostly lived between the fourth and sixth generations. The *arrangement* of the different narratives in larger works and their placement in a specific *context* was first done by individuals of the third and fourth generations, but the conscious rearrangement and recontextualisation of the narratives characterises the later literature. *Written texts* first appear in the third and fourth generations, *closed texts* from the sixth generation onwards.

Those who produced closed texts (or books in the stricter sense of the meaning) from the middle of the third/ninth century onwards can be regarded as authors by any standard – even when they relied on written texts of their predecessors, the act of compilation involves originality and creativity. However, if the texts are to be analysed with regard to the question of the milieu in which they were produced, the authors' intentions and agendas in producing a work, and the techniques involved in achieving their aims, this can only be achieved by a careful comparison of variants of the same traditions in other works.

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