# History and Heilsgeschichte in early Islam: Some observations on prophetic history and biography

As one western medievalist put it, '[t]he natural vice of historians is to claim to know about the past'. Nicholas Howe was lamenting that especially naïve form of positivism that makes knowledge claims about a past for which contemporaneous and near-contemporaneous evidence has been largely obliterated (Howe 2005). His field was the post-Roman west, but Islamicists have diagnosed the same problem in theirs. Wim Raven, for one, has written of the *horror vacui* that drives some to answer questions about the seventh century by treating ninth- and tenth-century compendia of historical narratives as if they were databases of Prophetic history (Raven 2005; cf. Wansbrough 2006, 2). Raven's observation came decades after early Islamic historians had begun a long-overdue critical turn,¹ but, as surely we all know, vices are hard to escape: the very term, 'database', has been used to describe those compendia in a recent and monumental account of the seventh century that belongs to a Byzantinist, who accordingly offers the reader a seductively minute and nuanced reconstruction of many of the political and military events that reshaped the Near East. His account is a model of the historian's craft (Howard-Johnston 2010).

And there's little scientific about it. 'If nature abhors a vacuum, historiography loves a void because it can be filled with any number of plausible accounts', Howe also wrote. Surely this is one reason why philosophers so frequently held (and hold) historians in disrepute: too often we can appear to be mere purveyors of the plausible. We may understand and advertise our project as one of description and explanation, accentuating how that project differs from the edifying, entertaining, moralizing or satirizing intentions of our pre-modern counterparts, but one does not have to commit to the 'linguistic turn' to acknowledge that our best attempts are ensnared by precommitments to all manner of convention (of plot, description and more besides); nor does one have to espouse post-colonial theory to concede that representation—be it anthropological, sociological or historical—always carries the heavy freight of social and political power. We should not kid ourselves in thinking that our 'training' as historians or skills as philologists allow us to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Wansbrough 1977; Wansbrough 2006; Crone and Cook 1977; Noth 1994; for a fairly caustic appraisal of the field, see Robinson 2014. I am indebted to Harry Bone and Shawkat Toorawa for reading and improving what follows.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> I echo, of course, the insights typically associated with Hayden White, especially White 1987.

control bias and strip away inaccuracies or irrelevancies so as to secure unmediated data. As Jenkins has written, we must rid ourselves of the idea that the

traces from 'the before now' which historians work on contain *in themselves* a specifically historical kind of information and that the 'knowledge' based upon it is a specifically historical kind of knowledge. Rather it is the application of the historian's particular discursive practices—the application of a 'historical' genre (rather than a geographical or a literary or a legal one; rather than a mythical, a legendary or a fabular one) that *turns* such traces of 'the before now' into something historical; nothing is ever *intrinsically* historical—least of all 'the before now' (Jenkins 2003, 38-9).

What kind of *knowledge* results from our efforts, especially when they are directed at a target as elusive as the seventh- or eighth-century Near East? A realistic answer would call it provisional and probabilistic, and insist that a clearer purpose is to advance goals that are propadeutic or political. There is no shame in practicing a discipline that is more didactic or heuristic than forensic, of course; and, at least to some, there is much to be said in favor of one that advances progressive causes.

It is in that spirit that the following set of observations should be judged. Largely synthetic and partially provisional, they may have some heuristic value to non-Islamicists concerned with the historicization of religious claims. I shall focus upon how belief and memory about Muḥammad, the Prophet, was transformed into recognizable history during the seventh and eighth centuries, mainly in Arabia and Iraq, and largely in terms of biography ( $s\bar{i}ra$ ). Insofar as my approach here, as elsewhere, can be characterized as revisionist—as another modest installment in an ongoing process of penetrating the fog of Islamic *Heilsgeschichte*—my observations about historicization are historicizing in their own right; they advance a line of research that aims to describe at least some of the creative dynamism and diversity of the formative period of Islam—that is, before the emergence of what might be called the 'consensus culture' of the ninth and tenth centuries, when, as El Shamsy puts it, 'the basic cultural vocabulary of Islamic concepts, practices and institutions' was coined (El Shamsy 2013, 2). We historians are all historicists by default, but some may find it surprising that Islamicists have turned to this task of a properly critical and systematic historicization relatively recently. It is, I suppose, some consolation that our disciplinary torpor

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Muḥammad and the origins of Islam have now become the subject of sustained and controversial research; some of the most noteworthy recent examples are Chabbi, 1997; Prémare 2002; Nagel 2008 and 2008a; Powers 2009; Donner 2010; Schoeler, 2011; and Shoemaker 2012; a useful overview can be found in Brockopp 2010.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> For all the interpretive difficulties that he himself posed, Wansbrough 1977 and 2006 [originally 1978] were instrumental.

has saved us from many of the costly excesses committed in the course of pursuing various theoretical 'turns'.<sup>5</sup>

As we shall see, Muslim biographers were also purveyors of the plausible; and they also had discourses to apply and causes to advance. If the dividing line between Christian and non-Christian doctrine runs across the claim for Jesus as Son and Messiah, the one between Muslim and non-Muslim runs across Muḥammad's prophecy. And if the history of religion has taught us anything, it is surely that the shape of a given event, text or person, especially one of seminal or foundational significance for a religious tradition, is plastic. In fact, Muḥammad was to be many things to many people—a legislating prophet for jurists, a legitimizing symbol for caliphs, the 'light' and 'friend' of God for Neoplatonists and Sufis, a pious exemplar and intercessor for virtually all Muslims, and a cynical or delusional anti-Christ for Christian polemicists. The demand for these Muhammads being so high, there were multiple suppliers working in virtually every genre and medium of Islamic culture. Indeed, a history of their production would probably amount to a cultural history of Islam itself. Precisely because Muḥammad's prophecy lay at the heart of Islamic belief, he stood at the center of what might be called the early Islamic imaginary.<sup>7</sup> In what follows I merely outline the history of one supply chain, the one that produced the Muhammad who dominates ninth-century scholarship, paying particular attention to how scholarly practices reflect the broader socio-political concerns of the caliphate.<sup>8</sup>

#### 1. Fundamentals

It is important to recognize what is *not* at stake. No historian familiar with the relevant evidence doubts that in the early seventh century many Arabs acknowledged a man named Muḥammad as a law-giving prophet in a line of monotheist prophets, that he formed and led a community of some kind in Arabia, and, finally, that this community-building functioned, in one way or another, to trigger conquests that established Islamic rule across much of the Mediterranean and Near East in

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> For a set of essays evaluating the 'turns', see the 'forum' of articles in *The American Historical Review* 117 (2012), 698-813.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> I leave aside long-extinct, always-marginal (and sometimes fictional) 'extreme' Shi'ite sectarians, who, appearing in Iraq and Iran, held radically contrary views, e.g. to the effect that the imams are angelic beings, etc. So far as I am aware, there is no evidence for Gnosticism in seventh-century Arabia.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> The bibliography is enormous, but a catalog of some of the material can be found in Brockopp 2010, Khalidi 2009; Schimmel 1985; and Katz 2007.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Throughout I limit myself to *sīra* material as preserved in Ibn Isḥāq (*apud* al-Ṭabarī), Ibn Hishām, Maʿmar b. Rāshid (*apud* ʿAbd al-Razzāq), Ibn Saʿd and al-Wāqidī, leaving aside not only later and non-Prophetic *sīra* works (see Robinson 2003, 61-66), but also the vexed question of the significance of terminology: *sīra* in this period always includes sections on the Prophet's (military) expeditions (*maghāzī*), a term that is sometimes used interchangeably with *sīra* to denote the genre. For an overview of the genre, Kister 1983.

the middle third of the seventh century. We may never understand the religious, social, economic or discursive connections between claims to prophecy and conquest movements, but it is hard to account for the success of Muḥammad's followers in bringing down the late antique world without attributing some agency to those claims, including jihad. With the exception of views expressed by a hyper-sceptical fringe, these fundamentals are beyond controversy, in part because the radical rejection of the entirety of the Islamic literary tradition has itself been rejected, and in part because non-Islamic sources can offer modest—but crucial—corroboration for the fundamentals. No what is at stake is not whether Muḥammad existed. For the historian determined to reconstruct the origins of Islam, it is whether we can discern the 'general outline of the events' that constituted his life (Schoeler 2011, xii). For the historian determined to understand how the past was constructed, it is whether we can track the passage from memory to literary narration—and serial re-narration (Peterson 1964; Borrut 2011; Keaney 2013). And I, for one, am considerably more sanguine about the prospects for the second of these two projects than I am for the first.

Earliest Muslims and their non-Muslim interlocutors did not need to ask if Muḥammad had existed. 'Who was this Muḥammad?', by contrast, was a question posed already during his lifetime, <sup>11</sup> and the Qur'ān, our very best—and most difficult—source, provides both negative and positive answers. <sup>12</sup> We read that he was not a poet (36:69ff.), or a magician, soothsayer or possessed (10:2; 34:43; 52:29); nor was he a fantasist, a liar or forger (16:24; 21.5). He was in most respects an ordinary man (18:110), though not a father of men (33.40), who had come from a poor and orphaned background (93:6ff.), to become, by virtue of receiving messages from God, a warner (of God's punishment) and guide (to His mercy) to his and all people (*passim*). The recited 'book' that God 'brought down' to Muḥammad suffices to allay any doubt that he is God's prophet (29:51; 2:23), for no created being has produced the likes of the Qur'ān (17:88); nor did Muḥammad produce miraculous signs, even by his own admission: 'The signs are God's, and I am only a plain

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> One example (among many) is Nevo and Koren 2003, on which see Robinson 2007.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> For a summary, see Hoyland 1997; much of the non-Islamic evidence is terse, but for two relatively expansive (and translated) examples, the first in Armenian, and the second in Syriac, and both of which are independent of the Islamic literary tradition, see [ps.-]Sebeos 1999, i, 95-6; and the Anonymous Zuqnin Chronicler 1999, 141-2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> I leave aside the question of what those who followed Muḥammad called themselves; Donner 2010 proposes 'believers', but few find convincing his description of the contours of their belief (an ecumenical pietism driven by an impending eschaton). We still lack an adequate taxonomy of seventh-century belief—monotheist and polytheist, alike; for now, see Crone 2005.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> We are still in the wake of the *Dekonstruktionsversuch* of Wansbrough, Crone and Cook (cf. Neuwirth 2010, 91), and so the history of the Qurʾānic text remains controversial, but here I treat the Qurʾān as a seventh-century witness to the original, West Arabian context in which Muḥammad is conventionally said to have lived. Views differ on when the text was closed and stabilized, but very few would disagree with the relatively conservative position that I take here. Crone 2005 argues against Mecca in favor of an agricultural location in the north.

warner' (29:50). (Combined with a doctrinal commitment to Muḥammad's illiteracy, an idea that is not clearly mooted in the Qur'ān itself, the 'inimitable Qur'ān' would become Muḥammad's probative miracle *par excellence*.)<sup>13</sup> Though mortal like all other prophets (3:144), Muḥammad was the 'seal of the prophets' (33:40), an elusive term that may best be translated in this original context as 'ultimate'. Whatever its sense in the early seventh century, scholars would eventually settle on a consensus that 'seal' clearly meant 'final'. In so doing, they would align scripture and prophecy: the Qur'ān, delivered by God's last prophet, was definitive; as such, it abrogated previous laws and norms set down in what were regarded as the two most important predecessor scriptures, the Torah (*tawrāt*) and Gospel (*injīl*).

To judge by the Qur'ān and such exiguous seventh-century evidence as we have, Muḥammad was thus held to be a man (that is, the offspring of the union of a man and woman), who, having been chosen by God, followed what elsewhere in the Near East might have appeared to be an archaic model of prophecy. Muhammad's theatre was the oasis towns of western Arabia, where his prophetic imagination lay beyond the grasp of the cosmopolitan Near East's 'hegemonic interpretive power', to import Brueggemann's evocative language (Breuggemann 2001, xiv). There he delivered God's salvific message, in both word and deed, apparently for the purpose of creating a community that restored God's order in advance of the eschaton, be it imminent or otherwise. In so doing, he was far more Abraham than Jesus. For not only does the Qur'an record all manner of preaching—exhorting, consoling, inspiring, interrogating, scolding, demanding—but it reflects a fair amount of legislating, leading and community-building too (Neuwirth 2010, 394-560). In fact, on the basis of the Qur'ān's explicit statements and unambiguous allusions, the testimony of an exceptional document that records a pact between Muhammad and the Jewish tribes of Medina, and, finally, some stray references from outside of the Islamic tradition, one can draw the bare outlines of an activist—even restless—prophet, who established a militant community of Arab monotheists. He then died, leaving behind a set of ideas that were to guide the religio-political community that he had formed. His death marked the end of his role in sub-lunar history.

This accounting is not as banal as it sounds. This is because it surfaces what seems to have been the central plank of Islamic prophetology from the very start: embedded in conceptions of God and the world that would eventually crystallize into systematic theology, it reflected a crisp distinction between God and Creation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> One may note in passing that this commitment—to revelation as a source of knowledge unmediated by learning—features in the epistemology of al-Kindī (d. ca. 870); see Adamson 2007, 43.

Given the religio-cultural matrix in which Muslims were negotiating their doctrines—a continuum of belief, ritual and practice, overlapping multiplicities of Neoplatonism, monotheism and polytheism that elude the familiarly exclusive categories of 'Christianity', 'Judaism', 'Zoroastrianism', 'polytheism', etc.—Muslims certainly had several models of religious charisma to choose from. It may be that the Gospels were translated into Arabic only in the late eighth century, 14 but the context that produced the Qur'ān itself seems to have been swimming with scriptural and extra-scriptural traditions, some of which had a more direct effect upon its composition than previously thought. 15 As one would expect in a late antique context, the created world included not just human and animal creatures, but also liminal beings. Angels thus have their place, albeit a fairly marginal one in the Qur'an, which may belie their significance more generally. So, too, do jinn, who in one place (51:56) are paired with humanity as the object of Muhammad's mission;<sup>16</sup> in their case one can also reasonably assume greater significance—indeed, perhaps even a ubiquity—than our elite source material would have it.<sup>17</sup> Given all the variety available, Muslims chose modestly. What may have been a difficulty—Muhammad's mortality was accepted, and from Adam through to Muhammad, messengers and prophets (thousands of them), were all held to be, simply, human. 18 The idea is rooted in the Qur'an, and was firmly institutionalized in Sunni thought. It fell to Shi'ites of various stripes to elaborate, less modestly, on alternative models of prophecy and messianism.

## 1.2 The tradition

Certainly more can be said about Muḥammad than this. But as an example of the difficulties necessarily involved in saying a great deal more, we may take as an example the circumstances of his death.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> For a recent overview, see Griffiths 2013. Biographers of the Prophet sometimes had it otherwise, doubtless in order to demonstrate that Arabian monotheists acknowledged Muḥammad as a genuine prophet; thus according to Maʿmar b. Rāshid (ʿAbd al-Razzāq 1972, v, 323), Waraqa b. Nawfal wrote the *injīl* in Arabic. On this and other confirmatory miracles, see below.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> At issue in a great deal of its preaching is not monotheism as such, but rather (re-)establishing *correct* monotheism, as Q 2:113 makes clear: 'The Jews say that the Christians are groundless, the Christians say the Jews are groundless, all the while reading [the same] book; even those who do not know [anything] say the same. On the Day of Reckoning God will judge between them on what they disagree about!' For the argument that anti-pagan rhetoric disguises monotheist controversy, see Hawting 1999; for reviews of the current scholarship on the Qur'ān, McAuliffe 2006.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Or, as Ibn Sa'd reports it, "'I was sent [as Prophet] to the red and the black'. 'Abd al-Malik [caliph; rg. 685/92-705] said: 'The red is humanity, and the black are the Jinn'"; see Ibn Sa'd 1996, i, 92.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> At least in Iraq, as was the case for other seventh- and eighth-century polytheists and monotheists, who defended themselves by inscribing (in Syriac, Aramaic and Mandaic) their anxieties on incantation bowls, thousands of which survive; for a survey, see Morony 2003.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Sometimes, even the tens of thousands; for one relatively short list, see Ibn Sa´d 1996 i, 23.

Every Islamicist and hard-working student knows the details: he died in in Medina in the middle of year 632, after a short illness. At least so says the closest there is to something like a canonical biography (*sīra*), which is attributed to a scholar named Ibn Isḥāq (d. 767); although opinions differ sharply on its composition and transmission history, one of its many recensions survives in a vigorously edited and expurgated version that was assembled by a scholar named Ibn Hishām (d. 835). According to Ibn Hishām, Muḥammad fell ill (initially with a headache) at the end of the month of Ṣafar or the beginning of al-Rabī al-Awwal of year 11; the Islamic calendar having started at his emigration from Mecca to Medina, this corresponds to late May or early June of 632. It seems that he first mentioned his ill health after having visited a cemetery called Baqī al-Gharqad in order to perform late night prayers. His last days, we read, were spent mainly with one of his wives, 'Ā'isha, in whose arms he would die; his health declined, but he had the strength to make rounds and received visitors. His last act was to clean his teeth with a green chewing stick that Ā'isha had softened for him.<sup>19</sup> He was buried in his house in Medina.

Student and teacher alike know all this because the Sunni literary tradition, chiefly prophetic biography, but also chronography and prosopography, tell it so. Accounts of Prophetic and post-Prophetic history were reproduced across these genres, sometimes differing one from the next, especially in circumstantial details and chronology; authors reproduced and modified accounts while omitting others; some supplemented the corpus that the previous generation had assembled with fresh reports of their own. Still, transmitters and scholars (the line is difficult to draw early on) had a high tolerance for inconsistency, and scholarship put a high value upon volume. And so the drama of the Sunni *Heilsgeschichte*, adumbrated above and fleshed out in hundreds of thousands of traditions that were compiled during the ninth and tenth centuries in thousands of volumes (the great majority of which attributed to eighth- and seventh-century transmitters), follows a common script: prefigured by a succession of prophets that began with Adam, and meticulously 'preserved' by generations of scholars so as to serve as exemplar and inspiration for future Muslims, Muhammad phenomenalizes prophecy in Arabia, a figure both mythic and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Ibn Hishām reprints, ii, 642-656; for a translation of the account, see Ibn Hishām 1955, 678-83; see also Ibn Sa'd 1996, ii, 366-7 ('Account of the chewing stick with which Muḥammad cleaned his teeth during the illness of which he would die'); and for an exhaustive treatment of that chewing stick, which begins with this account, Raven 2008.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Islamic traditionism—the collection and evaluation of Prophetic traditions (ḥadīth)—emerges in the eighth century, and its impact upon the law, theology, biography and historiography was far-reaching; for the last, Robinson 2003, esp. 85-92, and, very briefly, below.

specific (as we shall see). It is only when one escapes the gravitational pull of the Sunni tradition that one finds disagreements about fundamentals, rather than details.<sup>21</sup>

Here it should be emphasized that there is nothing exceptional about the detailed narratives that describe the circumstances of Muhammad's death. At least starting with Muhammad's 'call to prophecy' (mab ath), the green chewing stick is the rule, not the exception. We read in biographies by Ibn Ishāq, Ibn Hishām and many others that Muhammad was 40 years old when he received his first revelation from the angel Gabriel: 'Recite in the name of your Lord who created!' (96:1). About 10 years later, in 622, after a period of public and private preaching amongst the Meccans, he was forced to emigrate to Medina, which he made both a laboratory for religio-social engineering and a base for a series of military expeditions and raids that would bring much of the Arabian Peninsula under his authority. In 630 Mecca itself capitulated, more or less peaceably. Immediately upon his death he was succeeded by a kinsman named Abū Bakr (d. 634) and, two years later, by 'Umar (d. 644), who, ruling as the first two caliphs, inaugurated the conquest movements that destroyed the Sasanian empire and reduced the Byzantines to about one third of their seventhcentury domains. (According to the tradition, Muhammad himself had led armies that reached as far as the town of Tabuk, in northwest Arabia, but no farther; Syria and Palestine fell to armies campaigning under 'Umar.) Two more caliphs, 'Uthmān (d. 656) and 'Alī (d. 661), followed, each contributing to the articulation of Islamic belief and rule, each a contemporary of Muhammad and a member of his tribe of the Quraysh, each ruling the incipient state and empire from Medina, and each legitimate by virtue of acclamation by the Muslim tribal elite.

In sum, God had renewed His pledge to mankind by choosing Muḥammad to deliver His merciful guidance. And prophecy had delivered power to the Arab Muslims, whose task it now was to institionalize God's rule and expand His hegemony.

## 2. Fundamental problems

Such, in any case, is a summary of what one conventionally reads as 'history', and which might actually be more properly understood as narrativized theory—mainly theological and political. The case of Muḥammad's death actually poses several problems; and these can cast some light on the challenges one faces in making sense of the biographical tradition.

 $^{21}$  Thus there is no mistaking al-Yaʻqūbī 1980, ii, 6-123 (whatever the precise inflection of his Shiʻism) with his Sunni counterparts.

The first is the complete absence of contemporary or even seventh-century evidence, be it archaeological, documentary or literary, for the conventional dating of 632. The earliest secure and datable reference to the fact of Muḥammad's death appears to be an Egyptian tombstone that was cut and erected to memorialize a woman named 'Abbāsa bint/daughter of Juray[j], apparently in one of the cemeteries in Aswan. 'Abbāsa, one reads, died on 14 of Dhū al-Qa'da of year 71 (21 April 691), and the tombstone, which was presumably erected soon afterwards, speaks of the *muṣība* (lit. 'calamity', here 'death') that befell 'the Prophet, Muḥammad', 'the greatest calamity of the people of Islam' (a'zam maṣā'ib ahl al-islām). As it happens, this is the second oldest surviving tombstone in Islam, one of a small handful of pieces of evidence (e.g., graffiti, inscriptions, coins and papyri) that date from its first decades. Several reflect the quick uptake of the Islamic calendar (from 622); this one is also notable for its use of 'ahl al-islām', which, in combination with the name (Juray[j], apparently George), can be taken to suggest that 'Abbāsa was a convert. Especially against the Christian background of seventh-century Aswan, its insistence that '…she died…confessing that there is no god but God, alone and without partner, and that Muḥammad is his servant and messenger' may be of some note.<sup>23</sup>

The absence of *any* mention of Muḥammad across all the surviving material evidence for most of the seventh century is well known, and contrasts sharply with the frequency with which his name appears, starting in the 680s, particularly on coins, which circulated widely across the caliphate. Too much can be made of the silence (Johns 2003). What appears to be the most promising explanation for the change lies in the transformations—in both scale and language of legitimacy—of the Umayyad state at the end of the seventh century. It appears that opponents to Umayyad rule had seized upon Muḥammad as a symbol in the 680s; and the ruling clan of the Umayyads, the Marwanids (692-750), responded in kind, initiating a series of reforms that, *inter alia*, featured the profession of monotheism and prophecy of Muḥammad. Putting things in structural terms, one might say that as Umayyad *Staatlichkeit* grew at the expense of less formal networks of loyalty and obedience in the late seventh and early eighth centuries, so, too, did the need for a transcendent symbol of rule.<sup>24</sup> The material evidence can thus document the Umayyads' patronage of Muḥammad as legitimizing symbol, a fact that is presumably not unrelated to the patronage they offered to scholars collecting accounts that would be included in Prophetic biography, as we shall see.

 $<sup>^{22}</sup>$  Or, to be more precise, for the conventional dating as expressed according to the lunar calendar, either explicitly or inferentially.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Grohmann 1966, 13-14; Halevi 2007, 20-21; and, for a longer discussion, now Bacharach and Anwar 2012. Hoyland 1997a (note 65) gingerly proposes emending the date to 171.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Cf. Robinson 2005, 81-121; Hoyland 1997, 545-59; Hoyland 2006; Johns 2003; and Donner 2010, 194-224.

The second problem is posed by a set of contradictions: eleven alternative accounts, some first discussed by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook forty years ago, but recently filled out and thoroughly examined in a monograph by Stephen Shoemaker, which would have it that Muḥammad was alive at the time of the conquest of Palestine. Since these events can be securely dated to 634 or 635, his death in 632 is obviously thrown into some doubt (Crone and Cook, 1977; Shoemaker 2012). The earliest is a Greek text composed in about 634; thereupon follow a Hebrew source written between 635 and 645, a Syriac account from about 660, several more Syriac texts from the later seventh and eighth centuries, a Coptic account (translated from a now-lost original Arabic), one in Latin (written in 741), a piece of Samaritan Arabic and, finally, a document that is conventionally known as 'Umar's letter to Leo, which survives in eighth-century Armenian. It is a pretty good haul of evidence: Greek, Hebrew, Syriac, Armenian, Latin, and Coptic sources, written by Christians and Jews of multiple confessions and orientations, who were composing in a wide variety of literary genres, for varying audiences, in Spain, North Africa, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Northern Mesopotamia and south-west Iran.

This said, there is no question of *necessarily* privileging non-Muslim sources over Muslim ones, of replacing 632 with 634 or 635; they may be early, but they are often subject to severe bias of their own, and besides, some can be adduced to corroborate the Islamic tradition on matters both major and minor (Hoyland 1997; Robinson 2004). But such an impressive spread of texts, the majority of which pre-date the earliest biographical accounts from within the Islamic tradition, cannot be wished away, especially, as Shoemaker argues, because accounts from within the Islamic tradition can be adduced to support their claim that Muḥammad's message was principally eschatological, and that his geographic focus was Jerusalem, rather than Mecca (Shoemaker 2012; cf. Crone and Cook 1977, and Donner 2010, 142-4.). The eschaton having failed to appear, one may further argue, such accounts were marginalized, and the Prophet was accordingly reconceived as a social reformer. In this connection, one cannot resist the obvious attractiveness in viewing Muhammad as an eschatological seer: it nicely explains the absence of Muḥammad as a legitimizing symbol early on—that is, while memories were still fresh. Why ground one's claim in claims that had proven wrong? Besides, the Umayyads were in the business of ruling for the long run. Given that dating schemes were introduced only secondarily into sīra material, as we shall see, it seems to me that the burden of proof now lies with those who would defend 632.

The third problem generated by the death narratives is their very quality: what exactly are we to make of the astounding level of detail? Sustained criticism of the earliest examples of *sīra* tradition

has only recently begun; and although the methods and results are controversial,<sup>25</sup> we know enough to know that understanding the biographical tradition requires tracking the evolution of the oral and literary practices that produced it.

## 2.1 Orality, aurality and writing

Muḥammad and his immediate successors operated in west Arabian towns naïve of sophisticated written culture, indeed one in which Arabic was still in formation as a system for delivering information beyond graffiti, simple contracts, treaties and the like. The Qur'ān ('the Book', lit. 'recitation') is not coincidentally both the founding book of Islam and the first book in Arabic, albeit one that was experienced principally aurally, as recited from memory or read aloud. What we have is a culture of mainstream orality and marginal writing, where poetry and other forms of oral performance were Arabian tokens of pride and cultural distinctiveness amidst the more broadly lettered Near East, and where accounts of the past were told and re-told without the benefit of memorization techniques necessary to fix prose narratives. News of Muḥammad and his contemporaries circulated by word of mouth from the start, vectors for the transit of information not only to subsequent generations of Muslims, but also to non-Muslims (Hoyland 1997; Howard-Johnston 2010).

There certainly were good reasons for those generations to retell and reshape the stories that they had received: reputation, status, pensions and privileges were conditioned by the legacy, real or imagined, of primordial Islamic history, whether it was made within Arabia during the Prophet's time or in the aftermath, especially during the reigns of Abū Bakr and 'Uthmān. The descendants of early converts (such as the Emigrants [muhājirūn, from Mecca] and Helpers [anṣār, in Medina] had pasts to glory in and crow about; so, too, the 'Alids (descendants of Muḥammad's son-in-law and cousin, 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib), who not only had a case to make for leadership of the entire community, but also specific tax concessions to defend. Meanwhile, the descendants of later adopters or even opponents of the Prophet had legacies to inflate or rehabilitate. Such family

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> The one sustained attempt that has been made to stratify Ibn Isḥāq's narrative (Sellheim 1965/66, XX) posits a foundation (*Grundschicht*) that provides the modern historian with direct access to genuinely historical material about Mecca and Medina, and upon this two subsequent layers were accreted: the first, influenced by Christian, Jewish and Persian narratives, constructs a legendary Muḥammad; the second also bears residues of post-prophetic history in its echoes of the evolution of the Islamic polity. One can agree that these are ingredients without following the analysis itself, which is doomed by its very stratigraphy. Compare, however, Görke and Schoeler 2008, 278-9, who, claiming to have isolated accounts within 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr's corpus that come from close contacts of Muḥammad, some of whom were eyewitnesses, speak of the 'basic structure of events' (*Grundgerüst der Ereignisse*). For more, see below.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> A good example is the controversy surrounding the dispensation of the settlement of Fadak, for which Muḥammad's descendants claimed ownership; see al-Wāqidī 1966, ii, 706-7; and al-Ṭabarī 1901, i, 1589.

interests are often betrayed by family  $isn\bar{a}ds$ --chains of transmission in which multiple generations narrate a given account.

Naturally, story telling was not the exclusive preserve of the descendants of those who had participated; anybody could attract attention (and compensation) by telling stories, provided that they told them well enough. We know that storytellers, entertainers, preachers and demagogues worked crowds in and around mosques, some telling tall tales, others circulating more prosaic stories and explanations. Indeed, anyone with a religious or political axe to grind could participate in the collective endeavor of narrating the oral history of nascent Islam, the stories transforming as memories dimmed and circumstances changed.<sup>27</sup> What better way to improve one's family name or advance a political cause than by locating an ancestor as a protagonist at a seminal moment in the Prophet's lifetime, or by fudging a date of conversion? And what better way to counter such claims than by generating alternative narratives? It is little wonder that lists are such a salient part of sīra—lists (often called 'naming', tasmiyyat) of converts, of Emigrants, Helpers, of leaders, of Jews, Christians and polytheists, of martyrs, of women, of stops, destinations, halts and places (between settlements), of witnesses, of recipients of spoils, of killers, of tax collectors, of military expeditions (usually 26 or 27) and raids, and of wives. 28 The religiopolitical life of the community was negotiated in part through narratives of presence and absence at Prophetic moments, as good an illustration as any being the Prophet's final days.

Including and excluding individuals were done routinely and shamelessly. A good example is the circumstances that obtained when Muʻāwiya, the fifth caliph (rg. 661-680), is said to have converted: one version has it that he converted only after the capitulation of Mecca, which would make it embarrassingly late and even the source of mockery; an earlier—and more seemly—conversion story also circulated, one which had the suspicious advantage of claiming that the conversion was covert (Abbott 1957, 85). Or to return momentarily to Muḥammad's death: given the absence of institutionalized succession arrangements for the incipient Islamic polity, what had Muḥammad said to his colleagues in his last hours? Might it have been in 'Alī's arms that Muḥammad actually passed away? And where, exactly, and with which wife, did Muḥammad spend those final days?<sup>29</sup> Similar examples could be multiplied *ad nauseam*. There was *every* reason to participate in that collective endeavor of creating the community's history, and many of the

 $<sup>^{27}</sup>$  The secondary literature on the storytellers' contribution to history is growing, but see, for examples, Crone 1987, 215-26, and van Ess 2001, 323-36.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> And this is just to name a few. This list comes from the index to Guillaume 1955; I draw the number from al-Ṭabarī 1901, i, 1756-59.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> See, for example, Maʿmar b. Rāshid *apud* ʿAbd al-Razzāq 1972, v, 428-39; Ibn Saʿd 1996, ii, 352-81.

resulting stories eventually found their way into written narratives. The history  $(ta'r\bar{t}kh)$ ,  $s\bar{t}ra$  and exegetical literature that survives from the later eighth and ninth centuries drew liberally upon a reservoir of storytelling that was filled during the seventh and early eighth.<sup>30</sup>

For the better part of a century, then, Muḥammad's experience and exploits were remembered and recounted, rather than documented, although the transmission of some written material (e.g. contracts, pacts, lists and the like) took place on a small scale. Thanks to the work undertaken over the last two decades—painstaking research that analyses select events by evaluating thousands of accounts, often along with their chains of transmission (<code>isnāds</code>)—one can occasionally trace the passage of accounts back from the surviving texts, through the ninth, eighth and, perhaps, even into the seventh centuries. This is a considerable achievement, which allows the historian to hear what appear to be, at least in some cases, genuine echoes of second- and third-generation memories of Muḥammad. Very different are essentially apologetic arguments sometimes made to the effect that the written composition and transmission of historical prose began already in the early to mid-seventh century; they are wholly unpersuasive. Instead, the consensus across the field holds that as far as the religious tradition is concerned, non-Qur'ānic, religious writing was controversial (many expressly prescribed the writing down of Prophetic traditions, <code>ḥadīth</code>), and that if Muslims transmitted accounts about Muḥammad in the decades following his death—as they doubtless did—they did so initially by telling stories. (Schoeler 2009; Cook 1997).

But, unpromising as it may sound, a 'writerly' culture would emerge during the eighth century, driven in part by the growth of the Umayyad state (661-750) and its bureaucracy, and the assimilation of regional norms. As the physical insularity of Muslim Arab settlements in Iraq dissolved—garrisons were swamped by non-Muslims as Islamic rule generated unprecedented urbanism—so, too, did their cultural insularity; to stake successful claims in the 'sectarian milieu', Muslims, inheritors of power and possessors of religious truth, had to negotiate in writing. Under Abbasid rule, this writerly culture would explode: fed by the material resources and political-cultural appetites of empire, eighth- and ninth-century Iraq produced mountains of written prose in a wide range of genres. *Sīra* was one example of this explosion, and apparently the earliest form of historiography to mature. Pasts that had belonged to individuals, families, tribes and storytellers thus came—selectively, of course—into the possession of scholars, who, through practices of note taking, lecturing, dictation and the 'publishing' of a given scholar's notes or

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> For some recent examples of a lengthening literature, see Tottoli 2002 (for the exegetical).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Examples are Motzki 2000; Görke and Schoeler 2008; and Schoeler 2011.

lectures (often by his student), transformed stories, lore and information into professional knowledge.

Because charting exactly how these practices came about is difficult, describing the origins of Prophetic *sīra* is inferential. On an optimistic reading, the first example of what might be called biographical prose can be ascribed to a figure named 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 712), but arguments that a corpus of genuine material from 'Urwa existed and subsequently survived the vicissitudes of transmission to ninth-century texts can be sharply rebutted.<sup>32</sup> The nature of the relevant sources—large and oftentimes huge compilations of discrete but overlapping accounts, each usually with its own putative transmission history annexed—makes distinguishing between composition, redaction and transmission devilishly hard. Similar problems plague our understanding of the work undertaken by al-Zuhrī (d. 742), who frequently appears as a prolific compiler of Prophetic accounts.

Even in the case of Ibn Isḥāq (d. 767), the single most significant figure in the evolution of Prophetic biography, we are left to infer things. That he collected, worked with, lectured on and wrote about a great number of traditions about the Prophet's life can scarcely be doubted; it appears that in his day he was considered the pre-eminent specialist on the Prophet's life, and his accounts were copiously cited and recycled by later authors. But was he an *author*—indeed, *the* author of the first biography of the Prophet, as is so often claimed? If, by 'authorship', we understand the production of a literary work in a validated ('authorized') form (be it definitive or otherwise), the question remains open, not least of all because his putative work survives, subject to vagaries of transmission, and apparently only in part, only as transmitted in a large number of redactions. Indeed, he may not have understood himself to be composing prose that would circulate in a closed (book) form under his name. Depending on one's view of things, he had either the fortune or misfortune to carry out his work before scholarship had settled upon practices of narration that distinguished, more-or-less scrupulously, between composition and transmission.<sup>33</sup> The Prophet's life was written, it might be said, before there were authors.

So oral histories of the Prophet, retold and reshaped as oral history invariably is, gave way to oral-aural-literary practices, which intertwined composition, redaction and transmission, and these, in turn, were eclipsed by compositional practices that would produce stable and closed—and so

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> See Motzki 2000; Görke and Schoeler 2008; Schoeler 2009; Schoeler 2011; cf. Shoemaker 2011, to which, while the ink is still drying, Görke, Motzki, and Schoeler 2012 respond.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> See Samuk 1978; Muranyi 1991; Robinson 2003, 20-38; cf. Schoeler 2011, 26-30.

'authored'—books. A protean past was finally being fixed. Given the ambivalence of our evidence, the *terminus a quo* for this can only be approximated to the early to mid-ninth century.<sup>34</sup>

## 3. Context and composition

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that the distinct feature of Islamic traditionalism, the <code>isnād</code> (chain of transmission), is less susceptible to manipulation, and more accurately records the transmission of legal, exegetical and historical accounts than had been previously thought. The scholarly tradition, in other words, was more continuous than skeptics have been willing to concede. But what was the more proximate framework in which accounts—some atomized and free-floating, some more securely part of lectures, notes, lists and the like—were assembled and reshaped into something like monograph form? Put another way, atomized stories can sometimes be recovered from the first century, but transmission history can only take us so far; to understand the historiographic vision that determined eighth- and ninth-century compilations, we need to consider context, especially in two respects: patronage and traditionism. Both require appreciating the scale of change.

With Ibn Isḥāq we find ourselves in early Abbasid Iraq, at some chronological, cultural and geographic distance from the Arabian setting in which the events in question unfolded. Ibn Isḥāq himself was born in Medina, the very 'City of the Prophet', as it was called, but his youth and intellectual formation took place in provinces (Arabia and Egypt) of an increasingly bureaucratic empire ruled by the Umayyads of Syria (rg. 661-750). His employment in Abbasid courts in Northern Mesopotamia and Baghdad itself (in the late 750s and early 760s) put him at the heart of a revolutionary regime in which the past, recent, Prophetic and pre-Islamic, was taking on new meanings (Lassner 1986; Drory 1996; Borrut 2011, 80-85). For the Abbasids' overthrow of the Umayyads was more than military; it was an ideological victory that featured political and biological claims to the Prophet's inheritance through both his uncle (al-'Abbās) and his cousin and son-in-law, 'Alī. The Abbasids, in the words of a panegyrist composing lines during the reign of Hārūn al-Rashīd, were 'those closest, if their genealogy were examined, to Aḥmad [Muḥammad,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> On the one hand, in the *Risāla* of al-Shāfiʿī (d. 820) we seem to have a text that was closed and stable by the time of its author's death; see al-Shāfiʿī 2013, xxx-xxxi; and El Shamsy 2012; on the same hand, we have the sīra of Ibn Hishām (d. 834), a 'fixed' text in Schoeler's view (Schoeler 2011, 33). On the other, the *Ṭabaqat* of Ibn Saʿd (d. 845) features necrologies that post-date his death, including that of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 855)—indeed, that of Ibn Saʿd himself—and so for Melchert, at the passing of Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ (d. 854), 'texts were still characteristically unstable'; see Melchert 1999, 322-25. For *adab* ('belles lettres') especially, see Toorawa 2005, 7-12; on the transmission of al-Madāʾinīʾs material by his students, see now Lindstedt 2013. There are presumably too many variables (genre, reputation, etc.) to generalize.

the Prophet] in [securing] redemption' (*al-furqān*) (al-Ṭabarī 1901 iii, 631-2). In this and many other ways, they staked claims in who the Prophet was, and what he had said and done. The reason why al-'Abbās, the rulers' ancestor, appears so frequently in crucial parts of Muḥammad's life is that such appearances registered political claims (Kister 1983, 362-3).

So more than the regime had changed. In fact, there was a conceptual ocean separating first- and second-generation Arabian tribesmen fighters from the bookish scholars who now possessed their history. For all that the biographical, historical and legal tradition would conflate things, acknowledging Muḥammad as God's prophet in the first century was hardly incompatible with acknowledging other sources of legal and political authority. There is plentiful evidence that Umayyad and early Abbasid caliphs conceived of themselves not as successors to the Prophet, but rather as 'God's deputies on earth', in some instances claiming religio-political authority that outstripped the prophets' (Crone and Hinds 1986; Hakim 2009). The Abbasid caliph, al-Manṣūr, claimed in his own words to be 'God's authority on His earth' (sulṭān allāh fī arḍihi) (al-Ṭabarī 1901 iii, 426). It was only during the late eighth and early ninth century that Muḥammad fully emerged as the primary source for normative conduct (sunna), such that the lawyers could articulate a legal discourse that was based on the Qur'ān and Prophetic ḥadīth which, they held, was transmitted, generation by generation, preserving and disseminating the Prophet's sunna. Alongside the Qur'ān, it thus functioned at the theoretical level as the fons et origo of normative conduct, both individual and collective.

In sum, 'classical' doctrines that make the learned class the conservators of a prophet-based law, and caliphs the guardians of a society ordered by that law, were the result of a protracted process, which are traceable now only in legal, historical and biographical texts

The terms *sunna* and *sīra* are twin progeny of this process: both denote a given individual's paradigmatic practice;<sup>35</sup> and, without qualification, both denoted the *Prophet's* practice.<sup>36</sup>

3.1 Ibn Isḥāq, al-Wāqidī and Ibn Hishām

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Thus Bravmann 1972, 123-39, which provides as good an explanation as any for the overlapping terminology.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> The prestige forms of historiography (including  $s\bar{r}a$ ) are nearly all imbued with traditionalist values, even though  $had\bar{t}h$  scholars were often quick to criticize  $s\bar{t}ra$ -specialists, especially for their failure to cite their sources properly; see Robinson 2003, 24-38; 55-79.

It is within this dynamic—a powerful Abbasid state, the rising influence of traditionalism, and the increasing appeal of the Prophetic past as a source for paradigmatic authority—that the biographical work of Ibn Isḥāq (d. 767) and al-Wāqidī (d. 823) and Ibn Hishām (d. 835) needs to be understood.

Elsewhere I have drawn attention to an apparent affinity between  $s\bar{r}a$ -writing and politics, especially ruling courts (Robinson 2003, 25-6, 122). Given that one of the leitmotifs of pre-modern Islamic learning is the independence of scholars of the law, history and biography, it is striking how frequently the bio-bibliographic accounts of  $s\bar{r}a$ -specialists (biographers or protobiographers alike) record court connections of one kind or another—and this from as far back as the record goes. The case for al-Zuhrī (d. 742) is strong enough already that Borrut describes what boils down to the creation of an official Marwanid historiography under al-Zuhrī and his caliph-patron, Hishām b. Abd al-Malik (rg. 723-43); it may even be inferred that court commissions played an important role in shifting the emphasis of his working practices from orality to writing. We know that Ibn Isḥāq was commissioned to write a major work of history by the caliph, al-Manṣūr (754-775), some time in the early to mid-760s; he was thus working in a court that was as universalist in its ambition as it was determined to legitimize its new-found rule. Is it unreasonable to assume a connection between the vision of the patron and the commission of the client?

Describing the shape of this work is matter for inference—he was lecturing, writing, re-writing and redacting throughout his life, it would seem—but there is some evidence to suggest a grand, coherent and integrated historical vision that began with Creation, carried through the Prophet's life, and concluded with a history of the caliphs. Expressed in terms indigenous to the Islamic historiographical tradition, Ibn Isḥāq's 'Major History' (*Taʾrīkh kabīr*) thus consisted of pre-Islamic history (from Creation; *mubtada*'), Prophetic biography (inclusive of Muḥammad's 'call to prophecy' and '[military] expeditions'; *mabʿath*; *maghāzī*) and caliphal history (*taʾrīkh al-khulafā*'). This, in any case, is what the relatively late accounts describing the commission suggest.<sup>39</sup> *Sīra*, in this project, is recognizable 'biography'; but it is also an episode in the larger unfolding of

 $<sup>^{37}</sup>$  Ābān b. 'Uthmān (fl. late seventh/early  $8^{th}$  c.), 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 712), Wahb b. Munabbih (d. ca. 730), al-Zuhrī (d. 742), Ibn Isḥāq (d. 767), al-Wāqidī (d. 823)—there's a virtual 'Who's who' of  $s\bar{r}a$  authorities who are associated with ruling courts. Many of the pre-Abbasid notices are usefully assembled and discussed in Horovitz 2002, but see also Schoeler 2011, 30-31.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Borrut 2011, 73-6; Schoeler 2011, 23-6; Judd 2014, 52-9; for even more, Lecker 1996, who compiles an enormous amount of information, including accounts that al-Zuhrī served as a tax collector; cf. Abū ʿUbayd 1986, 573, which has ʿUmar II direct him to write about levying the sadagāt.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> That is, a *ta'rīkh kabīr*; I follow Samuk 1978, 149-50, but see also Schoeler 2011, 26-29. One might thus imagine a work that in form (if certainly not content) approximated al-Yaʻqūbī 1980.

salvation history; Muḥammad has been made the pivot of human history, his life the fulcrum upon which God redirects His providential guidance from prophecy towards caliphate. On this provisional reading, 40 we may well have a Muḥammad fit for al-Manṣūr; at the very least, Ibn Isḥāq is the kind of scholar that the writer-translator Ibn al-Muqaffa (d. 756) had prescribed for the first Abbasid caliphs, when he advises the deployment, in service of the regime, of 'specialists in religious understanding, normative conduct and practices, and counselors' (ahl al-fiqh wa'l-sunna wa'l-siyar wa'l-naṣīḥa) (Ibn al-Muqaffa 1976, 61-3).

What is clearer is that we have a discernibly early Abbasid construction of Prophetic history, one which predates the crystallization of at least one classical doctrine. For, as Kister has shown, the recension of Ibn Isḥāq that is credited to Yūnus b. Bukayr (d. 815) contains an account of meat slaughtering that posed sufficient problems for the dogma of Prophetic inerrancy ('iṣma) such that it is dropped by Ibn Hishām (Kister 1970, 267-75). It may be that Prophet has been subordinated to caliph. This is one of many indications that the passage from Ibn Isḥāq to Ibn Hishām (via al-Bakkāī, d. 800) was one of essential transformation, rather than prudent editing (cf. Faizer 1996). Ibn Hishām's work, as measured by both its use and its survival, certainly swamped Ibn Isḥāq's in popularity. Why Ibn Isḥāq's putative work was largely superseded by Ibn Hishām's is a complicated question, which turns on several variables. For one thing, Ibn Isḥāq was working before scholarly practices had stabilized and distinct genres had crystallized; if his vision did integrate pre-Islamic, Prophetic and caliphal history into a single project, it was well ahead of its time. And by the standards of generations to come, it seems probably that he simply knew too little about the Prophet, as we shall see.

From this perspective, Ibn Hishām's *sīra*, which is both relatively narrow in focus and studiously parochial in outlook, was the safe choice. Having cut away material that did not directly concern Muḥammad, Ibn Hishām makes a brief genealogical nod in the direction of Muḥammad's descent from Adam through Ismāʿīl, and then, the Ḥimyarī antiquarian that he is, he rushes off to indulge his interests in south Arabia, this first section, and indeed the following on Muḥammad's 'call to prophecy', being dwarfed in size by his detailed reconstruction of the military expeditions led by Muḥammad against Arabian tribes, which occupies about 5/7<sup>th</sup>s of the whole. In this—the growing emphasis upon Prophetic raids—Ibn Hishām was following a pattern even more discernible in the work of al-Wāqidī (d. 823). As it happens, we know that al-Wāqidī received the patronage of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Which is anticipated by, among others, Rudolph 1966, 301 ('Sein [Ibn Isḥāq's] *Kitāb al-maǧāzī* stellt wohl als erstes den Propheten in weltgeschichtliche Zusammenhänge. Für ihn ist der Islam Fortsetzung und Vollendung der "heiligen Geschichte" der Juden und Christen; Moh. ist der Zielpunkt der Heilgeschichte, zugleich aber auch Vertreter des zur Weltherrschaft gelangten Arabertums.'

vizier Yaḥyā b. Khālid and was appointed a judge in Baghdad by none other than Hārūn al-Rashīd (rg. 763-809). As tempting as it is to draw a line from al-Mansur's universalizing and absolutist ambition to Ibn Isḥāq's biographical vision (Ibn Isḥāq died in the year that the final bricks of his world-bestriding Round City were laid), so, too, is one tempted to draw a line from Hārūn, the ghazi [crusader]-caliph *par excellence*, to al-Wāqidī's three-volume celebration of Prophet-ascampaigner. Certainly one finds Prophetic *maghāzī* catalogued in support of jihad elsewhere (e.g. twelfth-century Andalusia) (Robinson 2003, 122).

#### 3.2 Details and dates

The hallmark of Islamic traditionalism is reverence for past generations, and this dictated that the task of the author-compiler lay mainly in selecting, modifying and arranging inherited material in the service of his historiographical project. Whereas <code>hadīth</code> literature documents the Prophet's <code>sunna</code> in reports that are stylistically homogeneous, <code>sīra</code> can accommodate a range of literary forms, especially first- and third-person narratives (including dialog), lists, poetry, speeches and addresses, and, naturally, Qur'ānic citations. What brings these materials into narrative coherence is a commitment to the proposition that the theatre of Muḥammad's operation was the early seventh-century Hijaz. <code>Sīra</code> thus historicizes prophecy by emplotting particular human events in geography and sequence (or chronology). Put even more provocatively, through the employment of traditionalist methods, it provides the <code>mise en scène</code>, the dramaturgy and <code>dramatis personae</code> for the main act of Islamic salvation history.

As we have seen, the historicizing project was in part one of framing narratives about the exemplar-Prophet according to a given scheme. Historicizing also meant identifying, specifying and numerating—that is, filling the frame with the bright colors of finely rendered details. The result then, as now, marked the assiduity and industry of the scholar; the more he knew, the more he was authoritative. What were the names of the Prophet's horses, mules, (riding and milch) camels, sheep, swords, bows, lances, coats of mail and shields? Authorities such as al-Wāqidī had answers, and since few of such answers can be attributable to individual or collective interests of transmitters, they clearly reflect a scholarly enthusiasm for listing for listing's sake. It might even be proposed that tradition became knowledge through such professionalization—the deployment of obscure and arcane details that only a scholar could provide.

 $<sup>^{41}</sup>$  I draw the example from al-Ṭabari 1901, 1782-8, but similar material can be found elsewhere, e.g. Ibn Saʿd 1991, I, 234-48.

What had been either poorly understood or irrelevant thus became knowable and employable as narrative, a lean past being fattened by the larding of secondary details. Where did this material come from? Cook has noted the remarkable growth of information about the circumstances of the Prophet's birth, which became available in the half century or so that separates Ibn Isḥāq (d. 767) from al-Wāqidī (d. 823) (Cook 1983, 61-7; cf. Lecker 1995). Now, the explosive growth of legendary details is perhaps what one should expect in this instance, at least insofar as we can assume that the earliest generation of Muslims focused mainly on Muḥammad's prophetic career, rather than his pre-prophetic childhood or early adulthood. Nativity narratives in other traditions are often hopelessly legendary ('who knew?'), and as much as early Christians focused upon death and resurrection, early Muslims presumably focused on prophecy-in-action (Brown 1999). But the growth of information is systemic. In his account of the battle of Hudaybiyya, for example, Ma'mar b. Rāshid (d. 770), citing al-Zuhrī, includes the barest details about the Prophet's departure from Medina. Again, two generations later, al-Wāqidī is able to give a long list of sources (reassuring his reader that he wrote down what they narrated to him), and to provide a long description of the relevant circumstances ('Abd al-Razzāq 1972, v, 330; al-Wāqidī 1966, iii, 571-3; Crone 1987, 223-30).

So there was an appetite to 'know' the Prophet on the part of the scholar, working within a confessional and professional milieu in which such knowledge was prized. There was also an appetite to understand a text that had become obscure with the passing of time and effacing of genuine memory. Here *Sīra* complements the austerity of the Qur'ān itself, which offers the sparest allusions to its community's geography, chronology or prosopography. (In the form in which we have the Qur'ānic text, 'Makka' (Mecca) and 'Yathrib' (Medina) are mentioned once each, and Muḥammad four times.) In fact, given the indeterminacy of scriptural data, there could scarcely be better proof of *sīra*'s spectacular success in historicizing origins than how naturally—how unselfconsciously, even—the Islamic tradition and modern scholarship alike assume those origins to be the pagan Hijaz. To propose otherwise—say, to read the Qur'ān as intra-monotheist polemic, and/or accept its geographic indeterminacy, and then, on a wider base of evidence, argue that Jerusalem, rather than Mecca, was the focal point of earliest Muslim piety—requires considerable critical effort and iconoclastic spirit (Hawting 1999; Crone and Cook 1977; Shoemaker 2011, 241-260).<sup>42</sup>

An example comes in another battle, which can also serve to illustrate one aspect of the relationship between  $s\bar{r}a$  and scripture. The Qur'ān itself says virtually nothing of what  $s\bar{r}a$  calls

 $<sup>^{42}</sup>$  Which is not to say that I doubt the Hijazi context; the point is that it is tacitly assumed, rather than argued.

the 'Battle of Uḥud', and the early stages of the tradition, so far as we can trace them, betray little interest or understanding of what happened either (Görke and Schoeler 2008, 125-44). What the third chapter of the Quran does include is a handful of verses that suggest some kind of disappointing setback (e.g., 3:155, 'those of you who turned away on the day when [or battle that] the two hosts met'), which, as is characteristic of the Qur'ān's moralizing geography, it situates on a flat continuum of belief, disbelief, error and God's mercy. The reader/listener is to understand that a setback has occurred and that belief in the Prophet has faltered (3:144); still, believers should hold firm, confident in God's reward.

But can one understand more? The question was certainly being asked in the eighth century, and the answer came in the affirmative, Ibn Isḥāq himself claiming that the third chapter of the Qur'ān included no fewer than 60 verses that were relevant to Uhud.<sup>43</sup> The historicizing project in this case is typical. The event, given a name from familiar geography (Uḥud is a flat mountain about 3 miles north of Medina), is dated relatively and absolutely (after the 'Battle of Badr'; in Shawwāl of year 3 or year 4); the participants, leadership, and size of the armies (3,000 Meccans against 1,000 Muslims), are all specified, as is the course of the battle (including how movement related to topography and also to season, the crops now ripening). And of course the account offers details about the decisive turning point, when 50 (or 100) Muslim archers abandon the flank (or rear) of Muḥammad's lines, thus giving the Meccan commander (Abū Sufyān) a fateful opportunity. Some 65 (or 70) Muslims were killed in the resulting melee, there even being rumors that Muḥammad himself was among them. What the Qur'ān offered by way of allusion and generalized moralizing, sīra had made specific and particularized—in a blizzard of inconsistent and overlapping details; in such ways, an imperative to understand scripture has generated what in many cases can only safely be described as pseudo-knowledge.<sup>44</sup>

Conspicuous here are not merely numbers, but also dating. One finds the same in accounts of Muḥammad's final illness, which go to great pains to determine his age at death. Insofar as attention to chronology is a *sine qua non* for historiography, the transformation of past narratives

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> For some exhaustive treatments of Uḥud, see al-Ṭabarī 1901, i, 1383-1425; al-Wāqidī 1966, i, 199-334; and Ibn Hishām reprints, ii, 60-168.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> The starting point for this line of criticism is Wansbrough 2006 [originally 1978], 6-10. On occasion, one can even trace how hermeneutic problems posed by Qur'ānic allusions left their mark on *sīra* narratives, elbowing aside good data for bad; thus Crone 1987, 224-30.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> 'Abū Jaʿfar [al-Ṭabarī] said: "There is no disagreement amongst those who transmit historical accounts about the day that Muḥammad died—it was a Monday in the month of Rabīʿ al-Awwal; they do disagree, however, about which Monday…'; see al-Ṭabarī 1901, i, 1815-16; for a translation, Poonawala 1990, 183-4.

into disciplined, historical prose is a feature of the middle decades of the eighth century. <sup>46</sup> Biography would follow suit: dating is as virtually absent in the material ascribed to 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 712), for example; it is only in succeeding generations that author-compilers made sustained efforts to move from sequence to proper chronology, although some remained disinclined. <sup>47</sup> Especially good examples come in Ibn Isḥāq and Abū Maʻshar (d. 786), both of whom, perhaps not coincidentally, are credited not only with *sīra-maghāzī* works, but also chronographies (*ta'rīkh*) (Donner 1998, 230-48; Görke and Schoeler 2008, 272). In al-Wāqidī one finds a historian who seems to reluctant to transmit accounts *without* dating them. While for some it suffices to say that Muḥammad received his first revelation on a Monday, al-Wāqidī must identify *which* Monday in *which* month in *which* year of his life (Ibn Saʻd 1996, i, 93). This is a feature of his rhetoric that goes some way in explaining his stubborn popularity amongst modern historians. <sup>48</sup>

Dating particularizes; but dates and numbers can also universalize. Muḥammad died on a Monday, so we read—as it was also on a Monday that he was born and on a Monday when he made his emigration to Medina. This is but one of many stock formulae, *topoi* and tropes, which add texture to narrative. They do more than that too. Such stereotyping was not necessarily arbitrary, and the deployment of stereotypes can sometimes be shown to follow well-established Near Eastern and Biblical traditions: when we read that the Prophet's age at the point of his first revelation was forty, we come into contact with a well-established trope for plenitude, which is why numerous people and things are so frequently numbered at forty (e.g. the number of men participating in the expedition to Bi'r Ma'ūna) (Abbott, 1957, 76-7), and why 'maturity' is represented by forty (Conrad 1987 and 1988). When 12 converts pay obedience to Muḥammad in Mecca we are to be reminded of antecedents from both the Hebrew Bible and Gospel. Whatever the background motifs may be, however, dating functions beyond the semantic level, at least inasmuch as it can be said to freeze in time events that had previously been fluid, pinning them down in a chronological scheme determined by nothing less than the divine clockwork of the Hijra calendar.

So numerating and dating do the double duty of particularizing and universalizing, making the Prophet's life both specific and mythic. Something similar can be said about miracles.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> On dating as a 'secondary theme', see Noth 1994, 40-42. To move outside of the biographical tradition briefly, in the space of a single page Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ (d. 854) adduces no fewer than 16 reports to the effect that Muḥammad was 60, 62, 63 (by far the most popular) or 65 at the time of death; see Khalīfa 1995, 46-7.

 $<sup>^{47}</sup>$  A good example is the  $s\bar{i}ra$  material ascribed to Ma'mar b. Rāshid apud 'Abd al-Razzāq, which, by the standard of what became the standard sequence and chronology, is nothing if not disheveled.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> A case in point is Nagel 2008, on whom see Schoeler 2011a.

I have already noted a contrast in the uneven coverage of Muḥammad's life: what is transmitted about his youth and early adulthood compares poorly with the dense narratives of his life as a Prophet. Still, the more-or-less blank sheet of Muḥammad's pre-prophetic life is given some color by the infilling of manifestly apologetic and legendary accounts. Miraculous birth narratives, which align Muḥammad's mother Amina with Jesus' mother Mary, are a case in point (McAuliffe 2003). And as infant became boy, confirmation continued: there is a large cluster of accounts that variously propose Christian, Jewish and pagan recognition and confirmation of Muḥammad's prophetic credentials.

The best known of these has Muḥammad traveling in Syria as a boy, when he meets a character named Baḥīrā who duly recognizes 'signs of prophecy' between the boy's shoulder blades. Such confirmation legends relate in complicated ways to Christian polemics, which often drew a different conclusion from such meetings. Far from confirming his prophecy, they document his plagiarism and confusion: Muḥammad's aberrant views, they would have the reader believe, came from the misguided teaching of heretical Christians.<sup>49</sup> There is no question here of identifying a historical kernel buried within these accounts; a quick *sondage* reveals fifteen examples, all 'equally fictitious versions of an event that never took place' (Crone 1987, 219-20). Featuring miracles of their own (e.g., a cloud that constantly shades Muḥammad from the Syrian sun), such accounts can be understood as pre-prophetic complements to the miracle stories that fill the *sīra*'s treatment Muḥammad's life after his 'calling to prophecy'. No later than the early ninth century, accounts of 'confirmatory signs' had proliferated to the point that typologies were being used, including one that neatly drew the same distinction between pre-Prophetic and Prophetic signs (Ibn Sa'd 1996, i, 71-91; Kister 1983, 356-7).

The Qur'ān exercises all manner of influence upon  $s\bar{t}ra$ , but there was no stopping the emergence of a Muḥammad very different from the man behind that text. The historical imagination was sufficiently plastic to recast Muḥammad as miracle-wielding prophet—indeed, as someone who is 'fully human yet substantially different...not a deification but a transformation of essence all the same' (Saleh 2010, 29). Beyond remarking upon the fairly obvious—that vivid and probative miracle stories reflect both popular storytelling and apologetic concerns explicable within a rich

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> The literature is enormous, but one can work backwards from Roggema 2009 and Szilágyi 2008.

and contentious culture of Muslim, Christian, Jewish and Manichean contact<sup>50</sup>—one should note especially how miracle stories signal the systematic (if implicit) operation of Biblical archetypes and templates upon  $s\bar{r}a$  material, most notably upon the construction of prophecy itself. The prophet who hesitates to acknowledge his special role, the prophet who is reviled or oppressed by his people, the prophet who leads his community into a different land—these are but the most obvious ways in which template frames narrative (Rubin 1995 and 1999). Indeed, nothing less than the concept of prophetic finality—and, with it, ideas of epochs and the like—cannot be understood absent late antique antecedents commonly associated with Manichaeism, especially the shibbolethic use of 'seal'. <sup>51</sup> So whatever the provenance or shape of the Arabian raw material that was supplied to Ibn Isḥāq, the finished product bears the unmistakable stamp of Iraqi manufacture. <sup>52</sup> Dogma may dictate that Muḥammad's monotheism came directly from God, rather than learned or pinched from 'the people of the Book', but the scholars' Muḥammad follows models mooted in pre-Islamic scripture and extra-scriptural material.

There is nothing odd in this principle of emulation. For it is in the nature of God's benevolent guidance that prophets re-enact received models, locking themselves into paradigms that could, in turn, provide guidance to man. As one eighth-century scripturalist saw it, 'God did not send one prophet after another without making it incumbent on them to confirm the prophets who had gone before them and to follow their example'. For

God said to those who believed, 'You have been given a good example in God's Messenger for whosoever hopes for God and the last day, and remembers God oft' (33:21). Thus He ordered them to follow his example, (just as) He ordered him to follow the example of those whom God had guided before him, in (a verse) He sent down to him as a sign, 'Those are they whom God has guided; so take their guidance as you example' (Crone and Zimmermann, 57 and 74-5).

Nor does the operation of model and miracle denude the Prophet of his distinctiveness. *Sīra* prophetology in this period is sometimes implicit, perhaps in some respects restrained, in that it expresses itself principally through the employment of monotheist stereotypes and the dense embedding of the miraculous in the chronologically disciplined mundane—or, to put it more

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Kister 1983, 355 is able to adduce direct evidence for the early Abbasid context in which apologetics were generated: Hārūn commissioned a work on the 'proofs of prophethood', which, based on 'books of the foreigners' (viz. non-Islamic religious material), was sent to Constantinople.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> That Mani regarded himself as both paraclete and 'seal' is fairly clear; that some Muslims claimed that Muḥammad was paraclete and seal is about as clear. How Muḥammad regarded himself is unknowable. The scholarship on Manichaeism is underdeveloped, but things are now starting to change; see, for example, Tardieu 2008 and Reeves 2011.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> I am oversimplifying, of course, mindful of the fact that material collected from Medinan (or Meccan) sources was not left behind by Ibn Isḥāq or al-Wāqidī as they moved to Abbasid Iraq; cf. Petersen 1964, 83-4.

daringly, in an Arabian mundane made miraculous. An especially vivid example is his handling of the Battle of The Trench (*al-khandaq*), which is usually dated to the fifth year of the Hijra. Here Muḥammad responds to military imperative, dissolves Arabia's hard rocks by sprinkling water, multiplies its dates for hungry workers, and sends lightning-like sparks from his pick into its soil, each spark foretelling conquest. Whatever their genuineness, these and other accounts function to particularize the universal, or, one might rather say, phenomenalize Israelite prophecy in northwest Arabia (al-Ṭabarī 1901, i, 1468-70; Ibn Hisham reprints, ii, 217-19). In this, as in other respects, *sīra* in this period contrasts with examples from later periods, when the moorings of the specific and the concrete are often more or less broken, letting a miracle-making Muḥammad float freer of time and space.

#### 4 Conclusion

If the preceding has accomplished anything, it should have given the reader who is unfamiliar with early Islamic history and historiography some sense of the complex processes and concerns that gave rise to eighth- and ninth-century Prophetic biography. Much has been made of these texts in the service of reconstructing the events of nascent Islam; but more can and should be made of it for the purposes of understanding what might be called first-order questions. These include problems that have also seen some recent attention, such as the scholarly practices that created, redacted and transmitted texts, as well as those that remain largely under-researched, especially what Wansbrough conceived as the composition, through the deployment of specific narrative techniques, of Islamic salvation history. What we lack in primary sources for the seventh century, we have in primary sources for the late eighth and ninth. We should read them as such.

As we have seen, historicization is a salient—perhaps even the defining—feature of  $s\bar{r}a$ , which emerged in recognizable form in the mid- to late eighth century. It concentrates its narratives upon the life of Muḥammad as a scripture-bearing prophet, one who restores monotheism to Arabian descendants of Ismāʿīl who have fallen away from God into paganism. It thus records a mode of theophany (or, more strictly, hierophany). It is a theophany of a special sort, however. For it marked not just the manifestation of God, but also the advent of a durable divine order. Inaugurated by prophecy and institutionalized permanently by caliphate, this order became during the seventh and eighth centuries the political and economic hegemon of the Near East.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> An illuminating parallel comes in Ron Sela's recent discussion of the 'imaginary biographies' of Tamerlane, chronologically ordered prose narratives in anecdotal form, which recount all manner of miracles, dreams, derring-do, heroic battles and the like. In Sela's view, they say little about Tamerlane's fourteenth-century life, but much about anxieties and crises of the first half of the eighteenth century (Sela 2011).

Muḥammad's prophecy was thus the culminating episode of theophany, and, as such, had the burden of comparison with earlier moments of what might be called God's iterative providence.

How, in the contentious milieu of the late antique Near East, could the claims of both political power and religious authority be made persuasive? At least part of the answer seems to have been the production of historical narrative: prophecy is reified as Muḥammad is securely situated in an epochal chain of prophets *and* the measured units of days, months and years of the Hijra, his life unfolding in the unmistakable physical and human geography of western Arabia. Islam is thus anchored in a sacred space—the Arabian heartland and homeland of the Quraysh, custodians of the caliphate. It is a considerable achievement, which forms only one part of a much grander conceptualization of the past, both Islamic and non-Islamic, that was undertaken by Muslim scholars in Abbasid Iraq.

Wansbrough understood historicization as part of the tradition's midrashic impulse. Whether or not one follows Wansbrough and others in explaining the *generation* of 'before now' narratives (as Jenkins would put it) in the light of this hermeneutic, one can scarcely doubt that those narratives reflect a historiographic culture that exhibits some impressive features. One is fierce competition for narrative depth and breadth—the proliferation of 'data' (geographical, ethnographic, chronological and confessional) in service of authority. Another, closely related, is toleration for ambiguity and inconsistency (cf. Bauer 2011). In other words, biographers and historians staked their claims by knowing more than others did, but they seem to have agreed on a polyvalent past, one approximated by the careful arrangement of overlapping reports the came on the authority of figures who, at the very least, possessed verisimilitude as witnesses, transmitters and collectors. As much as the grand historiographical enterprise impresses as an intellectual and scholarly achievement, so, too, does the high level for tolerance impress as cultural achievement.

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