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The Qur'an Made Linear: A Study of the *Geschichte des Qorâns*' Chronological Reordering

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Introduction

How is the Qur'an to be read and studied? What organising principle and reading code should be used? Through which (legitimate) ways is its indeterminate dimension to be limited? Though questions relating to the referentiality of texts, to the degree of textual autonomy, or the issue of the ultimate location of meaning are central in all literary and hermeneutical endeavours, they seem particularly crucial to the study of the Islamic scripture. The Qur'an can be appropriately described as an 'open' text: a text whose loose structure and multifaceted content strongly invite the reader to participate in the creation of meaning.[1] Its often allusive character combined with the absence of a constraining narrative framework allows the reader to suggest unlimited meaning combinations, and experiment with different reading itineraries. This article is concerned with one particular way of reading and exploiting the Qur'an's textual richness which has affected and shaped the field of Qur'anic studies for over a century. Orientalist efforts to uncover the original chronological reordering of the Muslim sacred text started in the middle of the nineteenth century, with the publication of Gustav Weil's *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in den Koran* in 1844.[2] Of the four other Orientalist chronological arrangements of the Qur'an which followed,[3] that of Theodor Nöldeke in his *Geschichte des Qorâns* (1860)[4] was soon to become authoritative. As such, it was deemed to deserve a full revision, begun in 1909 by Nöldeke's student Friedrich Schwally, which resulted in a three volume edition and secured its seminal status. In the first half of the twentieth century, the chronological reading of the Qur'an, mostly based on the *Geschichte des Qorâns*' reordering, appeared to acquire a heuristic monopoly in Western research on the Qur'an, particularly among French Arabists such as Regis Blachère and Maurice Gaudefroy-Demombynes.[5] The strong and undeniable sense of coherence and, particularly to Western eyes, reassuring linearity which it grants to the Muslim sacred text was greatly appreciated, while its historical and methodological assumptions were little, if at all, brought into question.[6]

With the emergence, however, in the second half of the twentieth century of, first, new literary trends favouring synchronicity and textual plurality and, second, of increased

historical scepticism in Qur'anic studies, the value of a chronological reordering of the Qur'an became hotly contested. In particular, advocates of a more cautious use of Muslim traditional sources hastened to point to the (excessive) dependence of any chronological enterprise on traditional material, to the circularity of its argumentation and to its inability to account for – and appreciate – the present state of the Qur'anic text.[7]

Rather than tackling the direct, and perhaps insoluble, question of its historical validity, this article aims at uncovering the *workings* of the *Geschichte des Qorâns*' approach: What aspects of the *Geschichte*'s chronological study encouraged its exemplary status, as compared to other contemporary reorderings? How did Schwally's revision affect the original text and its status? To what extent does the *Geschichte* offer a chronological order, as opposed to a mere, and looser, periodisation? How does it position itself in relation to traditional data and chronological lists? How does its argumentation function? What is its internal coherence and what textual impact and modifications does it induce on the Qur'anic text? More, generally, what are the inherent difficulties encountered in any chronological classification of the Muslim scripture?

1. The Emergence of Western Chronological Reorderings of the Qur'an

The search for the original order of the Qur'anic revelation seems initially to have been intimately linked with a deep-seated curiosity regarding the life of the Prophet of Islam. The Qur'an was enthusiastically regarded, in Muir's terms, as a 'storehouse of Mohammad's own words recorded during his life',[8] through which his actions as well as his inner struggles could be accessed. From this perspective, its chronological reordering was considered a prerequisite to its historical use. Gustav Weil (1808–89) first addressed the question of the chronological order of the Qur'an in his *Mohammed der Prophet*, where he quoted *in extenso* a chronological list drawn from the *Ta'rīkh al-khamīs* of al-Diyārbakrī[9] as general 'guidance' (*Leitung*), with due warning to the reader, however, that he '[does] not agree with it throughout'.[10] One year later, in his *Historisch-kritische Einleitung*, he developed his own thoughts and critique on the subject. Weil's contribution, however, was still explicitly based on the *Ta'rīkh al-khamīs*' sura listing. It appears that, in 1844, al-Diyārbakrī's work was the only source known to enumerate a chronological order of the suras.[11] One has to remember that it is only in the second half of the nineteenth century that many of the most important Islamic manuscripts are made available to Orientalist use. Aloys Sprenger (1813–93), in particular, had a major role in these 'discoveries', returning from India in 1856 with a collection of 1,972 rare volumes.[12]

Theodor Nöldeke's (1836–1930) work on the Qur'an, at first a university dissertation,[13] was largely inspired by Weil's approach, and in particular his triple

Meccan periodisation. However, as a strong proponent of philology, he contributed to the emancipation of the study of the Qur'an from inquiries into the life of the Prophet and chose to look into the Islamic scripture for its own sake. His approach can be contrasted to that of his Scottish contemporary William Muir (1819–1905) who proposed his own reordering of suras while writing his *Life of Mahomet*.[14] One generation later, Hubert Grimme (1864–1942) addressed the same issue in the two volumes of his *Muhammed*.[15] While the second of these is a theological study of the Qur'an, the first, a socialist account of Muḥammad's actions, asserts – again – the necessity of a chronological reordering of the suras to any study of the life and doctrine of Muḥammad.[16] The philological content, and restraint, of the *Geschichte des Qorâns* has been seen as one of its strengths and a sign of its reliability. It does preserve it, at least to some extent, from recurrent moral judgements on the Prophet of Islam. These are, for example, very present in a work such as that of William Muir, who expressed a clear missionary zeal and was fixated on identifying the true nature of Muḥammad's intentions and the moment of his 'Fall'.[17] Muir was evidently intrigued by Muḥammad's character. His complex and ambiguous assessment of the Prophet's life is discernible in the last chapter of his fourth volume, entitled 'The Person and Character of Mahomet', where Muḥammad's 'simplicity of life', his 'kindness of disposition' and his 'moderation and magnanimity', is juxtaposed with, in Muir's terms, his 'cruelty towards enemies', his 'craftiness and perfidy'.[18] It seems that Muir's ambivalence and dogmatic views also had a direct impact on his chronological reordering. Nöldeke convincingly suggests that Muir's notorious but peculiar identification of eighteen short suras, which he calls 'rhapsodies' and suggests pre-date Muḥammad's call to prophethood, is an attempt by the author to exculpate, at least temporarily, Muḥammad – for whom he seems to have developed a certain 'affection' (*Zuneigung*) – from the 'sin' of speaking in God's name.[19] Digressions and hypotheses on Muḥammad's inner states are also pervasive in Hartwig Hirschfeld's (1854–1934) monograph, *New Researches into the Compostion and Exegesis of the Qoran*, which despite his title, seems to be more concerned with the Prophet's psychology than with philological or literary remarks on the Qur'anic text.[20]

The scientific quality of the *Geschichte des Qorâns*, grounded in its philological focus, is further reinforced by the negotiated character of its chronological reordering. Whereas some lists seem to be gratuitous, an affixed afterthought to the author's main study, Nöldeke does spend some time explaining and justifying his views, in particular regarding the Meccan periods. Muir and Grimme, for example, provide very little information as to their methodologies. Their lists are simply presented to the reader. Hirschfeld's approach, on the other hand, is deeply reflexive, founded on an elaborate identification of (Meccan) Qur'anic modes of communication and a – highly hypothetical – reconstruction of their plausible evolution.[21] However, his

study seems to hesitate between a literary study of Qur'anic themes and a chronological one:[22]

> As we must give up the idea of ever reconstructing the chronological order of the sermons, we may hope, *by means of a division according to subjects*, to obtain something like a survey over the material of which the Qorân is composed.

Hirschfeld then adds:

> If we succeed in carrying out this task, we can dispense with an accurate knowledge of the date of each revelation. Of a good many of them it is indeed quite irrelevant to know when they were revealed.

In light of this, how should we understand his surprising choice to add, as an annex,[23] a chronological reordering of suras and groups of ayas? Hirschfeld's decision seems to attest to the pervasiveness of the Muslim traditional list format, which, despite its actual content being contested by Orientalist scholars, remains the model to be emulated. The Western attempts at Qur'anic classification display the same linearity, one-dimensionality and exhaustive treatment of suras as the traditional enumerations. The continuity between traditional Muslim enumerations and the Orientalist projects is clearly discernible in Weil's pioneering work, which shaped the subsequent studies of Muir, Nöldeke, Grimme and Hirschfeld. Weil presents his contribution merely as a more cautious and improved version of the list mentioned by the *Taʾrīkh al-khamīs*. This sometimes overlooked fact explains why, in Welch's words, 'in Weil's First Period the first 34 suras, with just a few exceptions, are in almost exactly the same order as in the traditional Muslim dating'.[24] Contrary to what Welch implies, however, convergence with the traditional listing is not, in this case, the sign of an uncritical approach. Rather, it is an explicit recognition of the limits of the chronological exercise.[25]

2. The *Geschichte des Qorâns'* Main Strength: The Triple Meccan Periodisation

Beyond the scholarly soberness of the *Geschichte des Qorâns'* chronological study, it is the simplicity and clarity of Nöldeke's argument which constitutes its strength. His main achievement is his theorisation of the three Meccan periods, which were first conceptualised by Gustav Weil. This theorisation is based on the identification of two categories of suras which Nöldeke poses as the two poles of a continuum. Short suras with a rhythmic and allusive style form the first pole and period. The other pole is formed by long, narrative suras similar in style, according to Nöldeke, to Medinan suras; they constitute the third Meccan period. As for the second period, Nöldeke organises the remaining Meccan suras, fitting neither of the previous categories, into a 'progressive transition' (*allmählige Abstufung*).[26] At the same time he maintains the idea – now also turned evidence – of an irreversible weakening of Qur'anic

(or rather, in his view, Muḥammad's) style: 'the force of enthusiasm must have gradually decreased; the constant repetitions of the same ideas, which yet repeatedly fell on sterile ground, must have negatively affected the form in which they were declaimed'.[27] While, as Marco Schöller remarks, the method is simple and practical, steering 'the middle course between being too indiscriminate on the one hand and too sophisticated on the other',[28] the result is also powerfully consistent. The *Geschichte des Qorâns*' chronology aims at, or at least results in, making the Qur'an a gradually stylistically evolving text, while at the same time firmly posing the corresponding theoretical principle of stylistic 'decline'. As the textual analysis and the theoretical principle of stylistic evolution mutually reinforce each other, Nöldeke's demonstration, despite its circularity, emerges as particularly solid and, because it is based on stylistic considerations rather than psychological hypotheses, as objective and dispassionate. It also produces a satisfactory reading experience of the Qur'anic text, in particular to bewildered Western eyes, as Blachère asserts:[29]

> [The chronological reordering] projects on the Vulgate a reassuring clarity; it replaces the texts in an intelligible perspective linked to the plausible unfolding of History; it brings back significance to the Western approach and satisfies the desire to understand without which one could not go forward …

It is not entirely evident, however, why the stylistic evolution should have been so clearly irreversible and, from very early on, scholars, such as Aloys Sprenger in 1861, have raised this issue.[30] Yet, this point is so fundamental to Nöldeke's periodic classification that fifty years later, when Schwally completed his revision of the *Geschichte des Qorâns*, he felt the need to establish it more firmly by declaring it no less than a law of nature (*Naturgesetz*). 'One does not have to wonder about this evolution', he added in the 1909 edition, 'as it corresponds to a law of nature, and neither should we regret it, considering the ultimate success'.[31] Schwally's clumsy attempt to end the debate and definitely secure the *Geschichte*'s stylistic argument, ironically, ends up emphasising its fragility. The stylistic argument emerges as what it truly is: an 'interpretative principle', improvable but crucial to the text's demonstration, as the author endeavours to lead us 'to the version of the facts he espouses by persuading us to the interpretative principles in the light of which those facts will seem indisputable'.[32]

Nöldeke's main demonstration, that of the triple Meccan periodisation, is constructed almost entirely so as to support his stylistic argument. Thus, the first period is organised and presented in a way which aims at highlighting its ardent form and apocalyptic content. With the exception of the first (Q. 96, Q. 74, Q. 111, Q. 106) and the last suras (Q. 112, Q. 109, Q. 113, Q. 114, Q. 1) which are treated separately, Nöldeke classifies suras attributed to this period in three categories: respectively, those

that contain an attack against an opponent (Q. 108, Q. 104, Q. 107, Q. 102, Q. 105, Q. 92, Q. 90); those, defined negatively, which neither criticise enemies nor describe apocalyptic events (Q. 94, Q. 93, Q. 97, Q. 86, Q. 91, Q. 80, Q. 68, Q. 87, Q. 95, Q. 103, Q. 85, Q. 73); and finally those, by far the most numerous, which evoke the end of times.[33] This is an awkward classification, with the shared theme of greed in Suras 104, 107, 102 and 92 being totally ignored, Q. 105 (*Sūrat al-Fīl*) being reduced to an attack against an opponent – here, from the past – and twelve suras being characterised negatively, but it does allow Nöldeke to emphasise the last category, which most appropriately embodies the stylistic characteristics which he attributes to the first Meccan period. The solemnity with which he introduces this third category of suras brings to light its importance in the author's demonstration:[34]

> These suras are the most magnificent of the whole Qur'an and in them
> the passionate excitement of the Prophet is most strongly conveyed. It
> is as if we were seeing with our own eyes how the earth opens, the
> mountains collapse and the stars are jumbled together.

The 'dull' dimension of the third Meccan period, on the other hand, is correspondingly and just as emphatically underlined:[35]

> The language is stretched, dull and prosaic; the eternal repetitions, in
> which the Prophet does not shy away from using almost the same
> words, the argumentation lacking all acuity and clarity, which
> convinces no one except those who already believe, the narrations
> displaying little change often render the revelations downright
> boring …

Moreover, the logic of this triple Meccan periodisation, highlighting the first and the third period, results in stripping the second Meccan period of any proper characteristics, and presenting it solely as a 'gradual transition' from period one to period three. 'We have already remarked above', writes Nöldeke, 'that these suras do not share any definite characteristics, rather some are more similar to those of the first period and others to those of the third period'.[36] This is, of course, rather surprising, as suras from the second period could be, and have been, said to form a deeply homogeneous group, characterised in particular by the use of the divine epithet *al-raḥmān*.[37] Nöldeke is undoubtedly aware of the cohesive features of these suras but, in order to remain faithful to the logic of his demonstration, he chooses to downplay them.[38]

Nöldeke's periodisation of the Meccan suras according to his hypothesis of stylistic decline is not without impact on the Muslim sacred text; through it, the structure of the Qur'an appears smoother, linear and one-dimensional. It is, for example, a result quite different than that ensuing from Angelika Neuwirth's understanding of Qur'anic

composition as textual growth and additions around an original nucleus. While Neuwirth explicitly claims Nöldeke's legacy, her call for a dynamic reading of the Qur'an, 'revealing through subtexts and super-texts the ongoing historical communication process which distinguishes the Qur'an from other Scriptures', signals a marked shift in perspective. In this framework, the evolution of the Qur'an ceases to be a linear succession of monological discourses, but becomes instead 'an ongoing dialogue raising questions and giving answers, only to be questioned again and responded to again'.[39]

3. A Chronological Order of Suras?

If the rationalisation of the three Meccan periods is justified, the reasons for the actual order of Meccan suras within each period, however, remain obscure.[40] It is difficult to assert how far Nöldeke intended a strict chronological reordering, as the reader of the *Geschichte* is faced with conflicting evidence. On the one hand, Nöldeke unequivocally declares the impossibility of ever recovering the exact succession of suras, as he doubts that Muḥammad himself must have remembered it.[41] Moreover, he distances himself from Muir's work precisely on this point: Muir's biggest mistake, according to Nöldeke, is to have thought that a chronological reordering is achievable.[42] It seems clear therefore, that, within the Meccan periods, suras are not presented according to a chronological order, as Nöldeke himself hints.[43] On the other hand, how should we understand the logic of the order of presentation of suras, if it is devoid of any chronological pretension? As Nöldeke does not explain the reasons why, within one period, he chooses to mention, for example, Suras 37, 71, 76 and 44 after Sura 54, the reader wonders whether he might have some chronological insight. Moreover, in the 1856 and 1860 editions, some suras are mentioned only by their number, without any other information, which also seems to indicate a strictly chronological aim.[44]

The spreading of Nöldeke's work over five decades, from his university dissertation in 1856 up to his participation in the 1909 revision conducted by his pupil Friedrich Schwally, could be the reason for this ambiguity. It seems, indeed, that the 1860 edition does not repeat the totality of the chronological arguments presented in 1856. This is, at least, the case with Suras 56 and 52. In his short university dissertation, Nöldeke remarks on the proximity between Q. 52:17 (*fī jannātin wa-naʿīm*) and Q. 56:12 (*fī jannātin al-naʿīm*), the latter probably appearing to him as marking, through its greater precision, a progression in Qur'anic eschatological representation.[45] In 1860, the succession of these two suras remains but the argumentation is abandoned, replaced instead by a remark on the diversity of opinions of Muslim commentators concerning the origin of certain ayas in Sura 56.[46]

Moreover, Nöldeke's chronological aim seems to have evolved through these three editions. As he himself suggests, he seems to have originally thought, while

composing his dissertation, that a chronological reordering of suras was a legitimate and achievable scientific enterprise, and gradually, during his studies, became aware of its limits.[47] The 1860 edition, therefore, maintains some elements of the author's initial confidence, while incorporating at the same time much more cautious passages.

This prudence is further reinforced in the 1909 revision of the *Geschichte des Qorâns*, as Schwally systematically downplays both the occasional rigidity of his predecessor's work and the value accorded to traditional accounts (of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* type). Given that Schwally voluntarily, and somewhat painfully, restricted himself to 'minor modifications' (*geringe Eingriffe*),[48] the result is often confusing textual grafts with divergent positions regarding the chronological enterprise.

An eloquent example of this multiple authorship is the treatment of the first five ayas of Sura 96 of the first Meccan period. Nöldeke begins by affirming that he sees no reason, at least in Muir's argumentation, to depart from the classical Muslim view which considers these five ayas the oldest of the whole Qur'an, marking Muḥammad's prophetical call. He even proposes his own reconstruction of this milestone 'through precise observation of the vocabulary of the sura itself and taking into account the Tradition'.[49] The account of the prophetical beginnings continues unsurprisingly until the presentation of Sura 74 which, according to certain Muslim traditions, put an end to the suspension of divine communication (*fatra*) which followed the first revelation. In the 1909 edition, however, Schwally hints at doubts at the foundational character of Q. 96:1–5:[50]

> It remains to be proven whether Sura 96, 1–5 is really the oldest
> Qur'anic passage … The content of its wording would rather indicate
> a time when the Prophet would have received a new passage of the
> celestial Book.

Nonetheless, he retains the order of presentation chosen by Nöldeke in 1856 and 1860 (Q. 96, Q. 74, Q. 111, Q. 106), as well as his predecessor's succession of ideas and transitions. Thus, after having contested the initial character of Q. 96:1–5, he returns to the traditional narrative account that implies that this group of ayas *is* indeed the very first revelation: 'after Muḥammad felt the call to prophethood, he was not, it seems, very sure of his vocation'.[51] The reader who ignores the multiple layers of writing of the *Geschichte* can but remain perplexed when faced with these recurrent oscillations of the (multiple) author(s) of the 1909 edition.[52]

Schwally's main contribution to the *Geschichte*'s revision is a methodical distrust of traditional accounts of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* type. Nöldeke, although wary of the 'doubtful' (*zweifelhaft*)[53] character of these accounts, evaluated them one by one, validating some and dismissing others. He particularly resorted to them, like his colleagues Weil, Muir, Grimme and Hirschfeld, while dating Medinan suras or

passages. In Schwally's eyes, however, traditional data of this kind are only exceptionally of any historical value; this being mostly the case when their contents injure in some way the Prophet's image, such as the accounts relating to Muḥammad's 'temptation' to strike a deal with his pagan opponents (the so-called Satanic Verses, Q. 53), God's rebuking of his attitude towards a poor blind man (Q. 80), or ᶜĀʾisha's absence and the resultant attacks on her reputation (Q. 24:11–20). He regards most other reports as 'exegetes' combinations' (*Kombinationen der Exegeten*), an expression he particularly favours.[54] In many cases, Schwally prefers to insist on the general nature of the majority of Qur'anic passages, where it would therefore be pointless to look for a particular character or incident. He maintains this line of argument even regarding expressions which are most commonly assumed to have specific referents, such as the term 'your hater' (*shāniʾaka*) in *Sūrat al-Kawthar* (Q. 108), or the short passage mentioning a Byzantine defeat at the beginning of *Sūrat al-Rūm* (Q. 30).[55] At some other point, he acknowledges the historicity of a certain event, for it is attested in a satirical poem of Ḥassān ibn Thābit, but discards any link with Qur'anic ayas (here Q. 4:105–15)[56] as the Qur'anic vocabulary does not seem to support it; it must be seen, he concludes, as another example of 'exegetical invention' (*exegetische Erfindung*).[57]

Drawing on Fred Donner's classification of modern critical research on the beginnings of Islam,[58] Nöldeke can be said to have espoused a 'source-critical approach', as he maintained that traditional accounts can be harmonised or the strongest version identified.[59] Schwally, on the other hand, appears to have advocated a 'tradition-critical approach', where the emphasis on the long oral transmission of these data consequently lessens the possibility of extracting any precise information.

Schwally's critical revision undermines, in some way, Nöldeke's previous work. As a direct consequence, for example, the argumentation for the chronological position of a few Medinan suras (Q. 63, Q. 66 and Q. 60), which Nöldeke dated merely on the basis of a *sabab al-nuzūl*, is suddenly void, although Schwally retained his predecessor's order of mention. Furthermore, however, Schwally's approach hints at a general questioning of the conceptual framework inherited from certain Muslim texts, including the chronological list format and its linear and exhaustive dimensions. The 1909 edition, therefore, while constituting the seminal work on the subject, also contains the seeds of subversion of the Orientalist chronological enterprise. The search for a chronological reordering of the Qur'an, where suras are arranged one after the other in a linear, one-dimensional and irreversible way, is fashioned and determined by some classical Muslim sources, which all adhered to a list format. If Nöldeke affirms many times that he does not hold that an exact order is achievable, his 'source-critical' treatment of traditional data encourages him to believe that he can get *near* the original sequence of Qur'anic revelations.[60] As Richard Bell's experience, whatever one may think of it, has shown, a chronological classification of the Qur'an becomes

all the more complex and, indeed, impractical as one suggests a narrative remote from the major Muslim account.

Nöldeke's initial approach combined with Schwally's critical position generates an undeniable tension in the 1909 revised edition. Paradoxically, however, far from undermining its authority, this tension could be said to further establish the special status conferred to the *Geschichte des Qorâns*. The double authorship satisfies, at the same time and somehow contradictorily, both the increasing demand in the field to treat traditional data with caution *and* scholars looking for a useful and concrete way to arrange suras – they can then (mis)use the *Geschichte*'s table of contents as a strict chronological list.[61]

Indeed, reducing the *Geschichte des Qorâns*' table of contents to a chronological list, although it does certainly resemble one, overlooks important indeterminacies, besides disregarding the author's warnings. Firstly, the recurrent lack of argumentation as regarding the order of mention of suras suggests arbitrariness. This is particularly striking in the second Meccan period, where, although Nöldeke states that suras which he attributes to this period can be 'somehow more easily' (*etwas leichter*) chronologically arranged, no justification is provided to the reader.[62] The patent absence of any chronological argument underlines the fact that Nöldeke's statement, previously quoted, is in reality purely theoretical and has to be ascribed to his rationalisation of the three Meccan periods. Since, in the author's view, the second period provides, or rather *should* provide, a 'progressive transition' (*allmählige Abstufung*) from the first period to the third period, *therefore* suras can be 'somehow more easily' arranged so as to roughly reflect this evolution. Secondly, on the few occasions where Nöldeke discloses why he follows one particular sura with another, the chronological order suggested is only a *relative* one between two suras which share a similar expression or theme; it means that, in the author's view, the first sura is older than the second one, but not that they immediately follow each other – other suras could have emerged in between. For example, in the first Meccan period, Sura 78 is mentioned after Sura 77 because, as Nöldeke explains, the former's aya 17 mentioning the '*yawm al faṣl*' would appear to 'suppose' (*voraussetzen*) the prior existence of Q. 77:12–3.[63]

Thirdly, the linearity and exhaustivity which Nöldeke, like his Orientalist colleagues, aims to achieve imply other weaknesses. Some suras, such as Q. 112, Q. 109, Q. 113 and Q. 114, which are recognised as being difficult to date, end up congealed in, and by, any chronological ordering. These short suras are presented, because of their size, at the end of the first Meccan period, but, writes Nöldeke, Suras 113 and 114 could just as well be Medinan, and Sura 1 could belong to the second Meccan period.[64]

This indetermination is obviously suppressed in the *Geschichte*'s table of contents, just as is the composite nature of many suras. Nöldeke has been criticised for treating

suras as unities.[65] He does, in fact, analyse extensively the different parts that a sura may amalgamate, and the issue of sura 'coherence' (*Zusammenhang*) or the lack thereof, is a recurrent theme from the third Meccan period onwards. A reflection on the notion of 'sura' is, in any case, necessary to any chronological study. To what extent are suras, or at least most of them, to be seen as literary and/or temporal units?[66] What Nöldeke could be reproached for is that he does not clearly answer this question. Rather, his decision to respect the sura division as much as possible is, above all, practical: it aims at avoiding 'tearing to pieces' (*zerreissen*) the Qur'anic text and ending up with an impractical 'heap of materials'.[67] Correspondingly, his positioning of a composite sura responds to no systematic criteria. Sura 51 is placed in the first Meccan period *because of its beginning*, the 43 remaining ayas having been 'probably added subsequently', while Sura 29 is attributed to the third Meccan period *despite* its first ten ayas being identified by Nöldeke as Medinan. How then should Sura 22 be ordered, whose majority of ayas would be Meccan but whose title and 'main signification' (*Hauptbedeutung*) apparently date from Medinan times?[68]

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, using the *Geschichte*'s table of contents as a chronological list confuses the order of presentation of suras with an actual chronological order, and overlooks what could be qualified as the author's 'writing' or 'rhetorical' strategy: transitions, thematic associations, personal interests, aesthetical considerations, etc. Thematic associations between suras, with unclear chronological bearing, are common in Nöldeke's study. Sura 53, for example, is examined after Sura 81 because both mention a supernatural vision:[69]

> We would like to relate the last sura [Q.81] with Sura 53, although, despite the fact that Sura 53 does belong to the later suras of the first period, it does not belong to this third category [of apocalyptic suras]; these two suras can, nonetheless, be associated through their content, as both mention a manifestation of the angel.

Furthermore, Nöldeke's decision to examine apocalyptic suras at the end of the section dedicated to the first Meccan period seems to respond just as much to his profound aesthetical appreciation of them as to the 'stylistic decline' argument.

Distinguishing the order of presentation of suras from an alleged chronological arrangement is, in actual fact, essential when reading and pondering on all Orientalist classifications, even when the authors themselves do not seem to make the distinction. Hence, Hirschfeld's regrouping of Suras 33, 65, 24, 66, 63 and 58, which occurs in the body of his text and then, again, in his 'chronological arrangement of the revelations' appendix, results not from chronological considerations, but from a particular personal interest; he wants to illustrate, in this manner, a short chapter entitled 'Revelations on Muhammad's Domestic Affairs' and dedicated to showing

his discomfort with Muḥammad's private life.[70] Furthermore, this arrangement contradicts his own dating of suras, as *Sūrat al-Taḥrīm* (Q. 66), which is said to refer to tensions in Muḥammad's household following his frequent visits to his concubine Maria the Copt, is dated by Hirschfeld – on the basis of a *sabab al-nuzūl* – to year 7 but is grouped with other earlier suras which Hirschfeld believes refer to Muḥammad's private life (Q. 33, Q. 65 and Q. 24) and positioned *before Sūrat al-Fatḥ* (Q. 48), which is traditionally linked to the Ḥudaybiyya event and thus dated to year 6. The positioning, in the chronological appendix, of Sura 66 in between Sura 24 and 58 is therefore a mistake, or at least an oversight on the side of the author, although the reasons for presenting Sura 66 with Suras 33, 65, 24, 63 and 58 are evident in the body the Hirschfeld's study. In this case, Hirschfeld's interest in the original Qur'anic sequence was not only overtaken by other concerns, but also merged with these up to a point where only the most attentive reader of *New Researches* can disentangle them.

Likewise, a cursory reader of Weil's *Historisch-kritische Einleitung* might conclude, as Welch does, that Sura 109 follows Sura 107, as Weil mentions the former just after the latter. Ironically, however, Weil refers to Sura 109 to precisely deny, in contrast to the listing given by the *Taʾrīkh al-khamīs*, that it emerged at around the same time as Sura 107: '[Sura] 109 … belongs surely not to the first period, but rather to the second, where Mohammed's teaching had become widespread enough for the pagans to agree to some concessions'.[71] As Weil does not discuss Sura 109 anywhere else in his study, a reader confusing the author's order of presentation with a chronological one will be misguided.

Besides a writing strategy which is concerned with the way data are arranged and displayed to the reader in a convincing and pleasant manner, one can identify what could be called a narrative strategy, which aims at presenting the historical reconstruction accompanying the chronological reordering in a plausible and coherent way.[72] Not only do the two have to be clearly distinguished, in order to avoid misreadings similar to that of Welch, but also their specific objectives have to be scrutinised: both aim at coherence and persuasion, which is why they are defined here as strategies. The venture of a chronological reordering of the Qur'an, insofar as it aspires at (re)inserting linearity into the Muslim sacred text and making it tell a story, goes hand in hand with a narrative construction of the evolution of the earliest Muslim community. This narrative strategy is particularly visible in the *Geschichte des Qorâns*, which time and again seeks to provide a consistent, unified and, one could say, 'economical' view of the development of events. The three Meccan periods and the corresponding scenario of the weakening style and passion of Muḥammad work towards that end, as do Nöldeke's assessment of Medinan events and his ordering of the matching suras.

Apart from a few suras and groups of ayas which are dated on the basis of a single traditional report, of the *sabab al-nuzūl* type – mostly dubious in Schwally's eyes, the bulk of Medinan suras are sorted following two stages. Firstly, suras understood to be referring to crucial events, well reported in the *sīra* literature and constitutive of it, are classified and dated. They concern the changing of the prayer orientation (*qibla*) (Q. 2), the Battles of Badr (Q. 8) and of Uḥud (Q. 3), the attack against the Banū Naḍīr (Q. 59), the so-called Battle of the Trench and the ensuing execution of the Banū Qurayẓa (Q. 33), the Pact of Ḥudaybiyya (Q. 48) and the 'Farewell' Pilgrimage (Q. 9). These suras form the historical skeleton which allows, in a second step, the dating of other suras and groups of ayas according to content similarity or psychological contextualisation. Thus, *Sūrat al-Bayyina* (Q. 98) is placed after *Sūrat al-Baqara* (Q. 2) for, like the latter, it contains a stern critique of the 'people of the scripture' (*ahl al-kitāb*).[73] More revealing of the *unified* narrative strategy of Nöldeke is the fact that all Qur'anic mentions of sadness and difficulties are reported back to the time between the 'failure' of the Battle of Uḥud (Q. 3) and the 'success' of the Battle of the Trench (Q. 33). Nöldeke dates in this manner *Sūrat al-Ḥadīd* (Q. 57), for 'verses 22–4 convey the idea that Muḥammad at the time of composition was in misfortune';[74] Q. 3:111 which mentions an 'annoyance' (*adhā*) on the part of the 'the people of the scripture' and must have emerged in a context where Muslims, disheartened by their defeat, find themselves exposed again to their enemies' 'wickedness' (*Bosheit*);[75] Q. 24:46–57 condemning the disobedience of insincere members of the Muslim community, etc.[76] The 'economy' of Nöldeke's argument could, obviously, be criticised for its standardising effect and, indeed, over-simplification. Was it really the case that, throughout the ten years of Muḥammad's Medinan adventure, the *only* period of difficulties and struggle surfaced after the Muslim defeat at Uḥud? Although the two levels of composition, rhetorical and narrative, seem inevitable in historical reconstructions, they should be noted and their mechanism studied.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to explore the principles, assumptions, merits and shortcomings of the *Geschichte des Qorâns*' chronological reordering, as well as its specificities in relation to other nineteenth-century Orientalist classifications of the Qur'an. While Orientalist chronological reorderings of the Qur'an, emerging in the second half of the nineteenth century, undoubtedly mark a progress in Western understanding of the sacred Islamic text, as they directly arose from a better knowledge of Islamic manuscripts, the extent of the Islamic exegetical legacy on Orientalist classifications should not be ignored. Nöldeke and his contemporaries undoubtedly aim, through their self-acclaimed 'critical' methods,[77] to escape from the grip of 'tradition'; but in providing lists of suras, which, while not pretending to be exact chronological orders, exhibit all of the latter's characteristics, these authors

effectively compete with traditional Islamic sources. Islamic chronological lists and Orientalist reorderings, including that of Nöldeke, share the same exhaustive, linear and one-dimensional perspective – ignoring complex issues of potential reuse, reformulation, and reallocation of meaning during the time of Muḥammad himself and after him. It could, therefore, be said that Nöldeke's study, by smoothing out peculiarities and by aiming at coherence and rationalisation, strengthens the traditional Muslim framework of lists of suras more than it overturns it.

Schwally's revision of the *Geschichte des Qorâns*, in 1909, fifty years after Nöldeke's first university dissertation, introduces a more distanced and discriminating stance towards both Islamic traditional data and, more importantly, the wider chronological enterprise. A tension, or heterogeneity, between two methodological stances is thus constitutive of the second edition. It holds a delicate, and sometimes untenable, equilibrium between two differing aims, which are inherent to any modern chronological reordering: a critical stance to traditional sources, on the one hand, and a commitment to determine a workable chronological order, on the other. The degree of this tension, on occasions bordering confusion, was made possible by the revision process and the multiple authorship of the second edition. This characteristic might explain why no other work on the subject has acquired the same status, and why, as has been noticed, most scholars nowadays 'no longer try to establish a fixed chronological order or rearrangement of suras, on whatever basis'.[78]

To what extent, then, is the *Geschichte des Qorâns* chronological study useful? Nöldeke's work is undoubtedly very well documented, demonstrates a remarkable acquaintance with Arabic sources, and is packed with interesting comments notably of a philological nature. The clarity of his approach and argumentation, in particular regarding the three Meccan periods, cannot be denied brilliance. However, as has been shown, the *Geschichte des Qorâns* cannot be said to provide a strict chronological reordering, whilst its Meccan periodisation, though deeply coherent and persuasive, rests on unprovable premises. Numerous authors have suggested that Nöldeke's classification, just like that of Bell or Blachère, should be refined and completed by detailed thematic studies. Neal Robinson offers, with this aim, a vivid comparison with a crossword puzzle:[79]

> For further progress to be made [on the issue of Qur'anic chronology], there is a need for thematic studies … Such studies would have to take into account all the Qur'anic references to a specific subject, but without being rigidly tied to any one chronological classification of the sūrahs. On the basis of each study, one would draw conclusions about the probable chronological order in which the references to the subject occurred. The conclusions would, however, be provisional and might have to be modified or even abandoned in the light of the findings of

other researches working on different themes. The whole enterprise would be rather like trying to solve a difficult crossword puzzle. A solution to clue 5-down may appear outstandingly brilliant, but it is nonetheless only provisional until matching solutions have been found to 11-across, 13-across and 16-across (or whatever clues intersect with it).

Yet, the question remains whether a more reliable chronological reordering of the Qur'an is achievable, or whether a multiplication of thematic studies would both increase the availability of useful data *and* problematic issues of methodology, as each researcher would undertake such studies with their own set of assumptions and strategies. Robinson's image of a giant crossword, however evocative, reinforces an approach that is already deeply linear and one-dimensional, and gives the illusion that a final solution is there, hidden in the text, waiting to be found. A diachronic approach to the Qur'an, where important developments of thought and style do seem to have taken place, does, nonetheless, appear indispensable. Thematic chronological studies should be pursued, just as the *Geschichte des Qorâns* contribution to the field should be valued. The challenge lies, rather, in working with imperfect tools and on the basis of approximate premises, and keeping in mind their limitation.

NOTES

1 On 'open' texts, see Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, tr. A. Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard *University* Press, 1989); and Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). On the Qur'an as an open text, see Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*: *Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), esp. ch. 4.

2 Gustav Weil, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in den Koran* (Bielefeld: Velhagen & Klasing, 1844).

3 William Muir, *The Life of Mahomet: With Introductory Chapters on the Original Sources for the Biography of Mahomet, and on the Pre-Islamite History of Arabia* (4 vols. London: Society For Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1858–61); Theodor Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorâns* (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1860); Hubert Grimme, *Mohammed* (2 vols. Münster: Druck und Verlag der Aschendorffschen Buchhandlung, 1892–5), vol. 1 = *Das Leben, nach den Quellen*, vol. 2 = *Einleitung in den Koran*: *System der koranischen Theologie*; Hartwig Hirschfeld, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran*, Asiatic Monographs, 3 (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902).

4 In 1909, Schwally adapted Nöldeke's title, and work, to contemporaneous transliteration conventions, writing it *Geschichte des Qorāns*. Hereafter, citations are to *Geschichte* (1860) for the first edition, and *Geschichte* (1909) for Schwally's revised edition (first volume of the second revised edition). Unless otherwise stated, quotations are made primarily on the basis of the first edition (1860). Corresponding page references for the 1909 edition are also given, although in some cases the initial sentence underwent a slight reformulation.

5 Régis Blachère, *Introduction au Coran*, 2nd rev. edn (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1959); Régis Blachère, *Le Coran*, series Que sais-je (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966);

and of course, his translation of the Qur'an presented in a chronological order, by and large similar to Nöldeke's, *Le Coran: Traduction selon un essai de reclassement des sourates* (2 vols. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1949–50); M. Gaudefroy-Demombynes, 'Noms d'Allah: Sur quelques noms d'Allah dans le Coran', *Annuaire de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* (1929), pp. 1–21, esp. p. 21, where he bluntly states 'nulle étude coranique n'est possible, même sur un infime détail … si l'on ne s'inquiète point sans cesse de la chronologie coranique'. Richard Bell's contribution to the search for Qur'anic chronology, *The Qur'an: Translated, with a Critical Re-arrangement of the Surahs* (2 vols. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1937–9), although important and innovative, will not be studied in this article.

6 On the importance of linearity in Western literature, contrasted to other literary practices such as 'sequentiality' frequent in Japanese literature, see I.S. Brodey, 'Natsume Sôseki and Laurence Sterne: Cross-Cultural Discourse on Literary Linearity', *Comparative Literature* 50:3 (1998), pp. 193–219, esp. pp. 196–7.

7 Andrew Rippin, in particular, has explicitly formulated these three criticisms, see his 'Introduction' in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *The Qur'an: Style and Content* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. xxii. See also, regarding his emphasis on the appreciation of the present literary state of the Qur'an, his 'Reading the Qur'ân with Richard Bell', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112 (1992), pp. 639–47, pp. 646–7. Lately, a detailed reappraisal and defense of Nöldeke's methodology has been made by Nicolai Sinai, 'The Qur'an as Process' in A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai and M. Marx (eds), *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations in the Qur'anic Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2009 forthcoming). See also, in the same volume, Nora K. Schimd's analysis of Nöldeke's chronological criteria of verse length, 'Quantitative Text Analysis and Its Application to the Qur'an: Some Preliminary Considerations'.

8 William Muir, *Life of Mohammad*, rev. edn (Edinburgh: J. Grant, 1912), p. xxviii.

9 Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥassān al-Diyārbakrī, tenth/sixteenth-century author of *Taʾrīkh al-khamīs fī aḥwāl anfās nafīs*, mainly a 'life of the Prophet' to which is added a historical sketch up to the first Ottoman rulers.

10 The whole quote is the following: 'obgleich wir ihr nicht durchgängig beistimmen, mag sie doch dem Leser des Korans im Allgemeinen als Leitung dienen; nur vergesse er nicht, daß, besonders bei den größeren Suren, eine chronologische Bestimmung überhaupt nur von einem Theile ihres Inhalts gelten kann, während andere, wie mir schon gesehen, und noch in der Folge zeigen werden, einer frühern oder spätern Zeit angehören' (Gustav Weil, *Mohammed der Prophet, sein Leben und seine Lehre, aus handschriftlichen Quellen und dem Koran geschöpft und dargestellt* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1843), pp. 363–4). All translations are my own.

11 Weil is only aware of a slightly divergent list mentioned in a second manuscript variant of the *Taʾrīkh al-khamīs* and presented by the Austro-Hungarian Orientalist von Hammer-Purgstall; see Weil, *Mohammed der Prophet*, pp. 363–4. A few years later, in 1860, Nöldeke is familiar with a substantial number of these lists, found in al-Yaʿqūbī's *Tārīkh*, Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*, al-Bayḍāwī's *Anwār al-tanzīl*, al-Suyūṭī's *Itqān*, and in the fifteenth-century manuscript by ʿOmar ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Kāfī; see *Geschichte* (1860), pp. 46–9; *Geschichte* (1909), pp. 59–63.

12 Among which were Ibn Hishām's *Sīra*, parts of Ibn Saʿd's *Ṭabaqāt*, al-Wāqidī's *Kitāb al-maghāzī*, some volumes of al-Ṭabarī's *Taʾrīkh al-rusul waʾl-mulūk*, Mālik ibn Anas' *Muwaṭṭaʾ,* and the six canonical Ḥadīth collections. See a note celebrating this major event in the *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 11 (1857), p. 569.

13 Theodor Nöldeke, *De origine et compositione surarum qoranicarum ipsiusque Qorani* (Göttingen: G.F. Kaestner, 1856).

14 Each chapter of the biography is followed by a presentation of the suras, organised in chronological order, which Muir attributes to this period. See for example, Muir, *Life of Mahomet*, vol. 2, p. 135. His chronological reordering is also reproduced in his *The Corân, its Composition and Teaching and the Testimony it Bears to the Holy Scriptures* (London: Society For Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1878), pp. 43–7.

15 See note 3 for publication details.

16 Grimme, *Mohammed*, vol. 1, p. viii.

17 Muir, *Life of Mahomet*, vol. 2, p. 73.

18 Muir, *Life of Mahomet*, vol. 4, pp. 302–24.

19 *Geschichte* (1860), p. 61; *Geschichte* (1909), pp. 76–7.

20 See for example the following: 'there is scarcely a single revelation of narrative character in which the "sign" is not mentioned. This proves how keenly Muḥammad felt the disappointment of being still unable to perform a miracle' (Hirschfeld, *New Researches*, p. 60).

21 Hirschfeld poses, a priori, a *necessary* succession of Qur'anic modes (confirmatory, declamatory, narrative, descriptive and legislative), before sorting out suras and groups of ayas according to these predefined categories. On his methodology, see his *New Researches*, p. 36.

22 Hirschfeld, *New Researches*, p. 36. My italics.

23 Annex entitled '[Approximately] Chronological Arrangement of the Revelations' (Hirschfeld, *New Researches*, pp. 143–5).

24 A.T. Welch, art. 'al-Ḳurʾān' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2ⁿᵈ edn.

25 'It is not possible to give an exact chronological order of these suras … due to their similarity in content and form; we therefore enumerate those which we assign to this period following the order that these suras have in the tradition already mentioned' ('Ein genaue Zeitfolge dieser Suren … läßt sich wegen der Gleichheit ihres Inhalts und ihrer Form nicht angeben; wir zählen daher diejenigen, welche wir in diese Periode setzen, nach der Ordnung her, wie sie in der schon erwähnten Tradition auf einander folgen' (Weil, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung*, p. 59)).

26 *Geschichte* (1860), pp. 57–8; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 72.

27 'Die Gewalt der Begeisterung mußte sich allmählig vermindern, die stete Wiederholung derselben Gedanken, die dennoch immer wieder auf unfruchtbaren Boden fielen, mußte nachtheilig auf die Form wirken, in der sie vorgetragen wurden' (*Geschichte* (1860), p. 90; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 118).

28 M. Schöller, art. 'Post-Enlightenment Academic Study of the Qurʾān' in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*.

29 '[Le reclassement chronologique] projette sur la Vulgate une clarté rassurante; il replace les textes en une perspective intelligible parce que liée au déroulement plausible de l'Histoire; il rend à la démarche occidentale sa signification et répond au désir de comprendre sans lequel on ne saurait aller plus en avant …' (Blachère, *Le Coran*, p. 29).

30 Aloys Sprenger, *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammad, nach bisher groesstentheils unbenutzen Quellen* (3 vols. Berlin: Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1861–5), vol. 1, pp. xv–vi. The excessive dependence on the style argument is the main criticism levelled against Nöldeke's reconstruction, and justifiably so. See Welch, art. 'al-Ḳurʾān', p. 417; Richard Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1953); p. 102; Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*: *A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (London: SCM Press, 1996), p. 93.

31 'Man braucht sich über diese Entwicklung nicht zu wundern, da sie einem Naturgesetz entspricht, auch darf man sie angesichts des schließlichen Erfolges nicht bedauern' (*Geschichte*

(1909), p. 118). Blachère, however, developed a new line of reasoning to support Nöldeke's claim by referring to a 'mystical curb', which he suggested Muḥammad shared with well-known mystics such as Teresa of Avila (Blachère, *Introduction au Coran*, pp. 256–9).

32 As the American literary and hermeneutic theorist Stanley Fish analyses the act of interpretation and persuasion in his *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 339.

33 *Geschichte* (1860), p. 73; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 91 (slight reformulation).

34 'Jene Sûren sind die großartigsten des ganzen Qorâns und in ihnen tritt die leidenschaftliche Erregung des Propheten am mächtigsten hervor. Es ist, als ob man mit Augen sähe, wie die Erde sich aufthut, die Berge zerstieben und die Sterne durcheinander geworfen werden' (*Geschichte* (1860), p. 78; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 98).

35 'Die Sprache is gedehnt, matt und prosaisch, die ewigen Wiederholungen, bei denen der Prophet sich nicht scheut, fast dieselben Worte zu gebrauchen, die aller Schärfe und Klarheit entbehrende Beweisführung, die Niemanden überzeugt, als den, welcher schon von vorn herein an das Endresultat glaubt, die wenig Abwechselung bietenden Erzählungen machen die Offenbarungen oft geradezu langweilig …' (*Geschichte* (1860), p. 107; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 143 (slight reformulation)).

36 'Schon oben bemerkten wir, daß diese Sûren keinen bestimmten gemeinschaftlichen Charakter haben, sondern daß einige mehr denen der ersten, andere denen der dritten Periode ähnlich sind' (*Geschichte* (1860), p. 89; *Geschichte* (1909), pp. 117–8).

37 See Sprenger, *Das Leben*, vol. 2, p. 213; and, more recently, R. Blachère, *Le Coran* (Paris: Maisonneuve-Larose, 2005), pp. 13–15; and Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (Berlin: W.D. Gruyter, 1981).

38 He eventually notes some of the characteristics of suras of this period (*Geschichte* (1860), pp. 91–2; *Geschichte* (1909), pp. 119–21).

39 Angelika Neuwirth, 'Meccan Texts – Medinan Additions? Politics and the Re-Reading of Liturgical Communications' in R. Arnzen and J. Thielmann (eds), *Words, Texts and Concepts Cruising the Mediterranean Sea: Studies on the Sources, Contents and Influences of Islamic Civilization and Arabic Philosophy and Science* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2004), pp. 73–93, p. 75. Neuwirth has claimed Nöldeke's legacy, in particular regarding his treatment of the sura as a unity and his triple Meccan periodisation, in her *Studien* (p. 175) and her *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān* article 'Form and Structure of the Qurʾān'. On her groundbreaking 'organic' growth approach, see her study of *Sūrat al-Ḥijr*, 'Referentiality and Textuality in Sūrat al-Ḥijr: Some observations on the Qur'anic "Canonical Process" and the Emergence of a Community' in Issa J. Boullata (ed.), *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'ān* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), pp. 143–72, esp. pp. 158–60; and her analysis of Qur'anic readings of the Calf of Gold episode in 'Meccan Texts – Medinan Additions?'. Nicolai Sinai, in 'The Qur'an as Process', develops a similar dynamic and intratextual approach, while equally trying to justify Nöldeke's previous work on chronology. This claim of continuity should also be understood in the light of the alleged current polarisation in the field of Qur'anic studies between a 'historico-critical' and a 'hyper-skeptical' approach. See, for example, Neuwirth, art. 'Form and Structure'.

40 Nöldeke's approach can be contrasted with Grimme's who, while not justifying the logic behind his two Meccan periods (to which he adds a small intermediary period), does explain the order of mention of suras within each period: out of prudence and lack of information, he is merely resorting to following the order of suras of the ʿUthmānic Codex *in reverse*. See Grimme, *Mohammed*, vol. 2, p. 24.

41 'Or should we believe that Muhammad was keeping an archive in which the suras were being ordered according to their chronology?' ('Oder will man etwa annehmen, daß

Muhammad ein Archiv führte, in welches die Sûren nach ihrer Chronologie eingetragen wären?') (*Geschichte* (1860), p. 48; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 62).

42 'Ein Hauptfehler Muir's ist bei dieser Eintheilung, daß er auch im Einzelnen die Sûren genau chronologisch anzuordnen sucht; zwar ist er bescheiden genug zu gestehen, daß er seinen Zweck noch nicht ganz erreicht habe, doch ist dieser Zweck selbst eben unerreichbar' (*Geschichte* (1860), p. 59; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 73).

43 For the first Meccan period, *Geschichte* (1860), p. 73; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 91: for the second period, *Geschichte* (1860), p. 93; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 121: for the third Meccan period, *Geschichte* (1860), p. 108; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 144. Contrary to what Neal Robinson writes, it is not the case, then, that Nöldeke meant the order of mention of suras as an exact chronological order while Schwally 'was more cautious and recognized that within each of the four periods the order was only approximate' (Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, p. 77).

44 In the 1856 university dissertation these suras are (Mecca 1) Q. 101, Q. 90, Q. 77, Q. 87, Q. 95, Q. 103, Q. 69; (Mecca 2) Q. 50, Q. 67; (Mecca 3) Q. 45, Q. 34, Q. 35. In the 1860 first edition of the *Geschichte* only Suras 45 and 35, to which is now added Sura 88, appear in that simple and enigmatic form. In 1909, Schwally adds a short commentary to each one of the suras. See for example for Sura 88, *Geschichte* (1860), p. 82 and *Geschichte* (1909), p.104.

45 Nöldeke, *De Origine et compositione*, pp. 44–5. References to Qur'anic ayas in this article are based on the Cairo edition. As Nöldeke and Schwally use Flügel's verse numbering (*Corani textus arabicus* (Leipzig: Typis et sumtibus Caroli Tauchnitii, 1834)), when the two differ, it is indicated in an endnote.

46 *Geschichte* (1860), p. 83; *Geschichte* (1909), pp. 105–6. It should be noted that the succession of these two suras do not represent a strict chronological order but only a relative one. Nöldeke is not implying that Sura 56 immediately followed Sura 52 but that the latter appears to be of an earlier date.

47 'Daß sich unter den mekkanischen Sûren zwar einzelne Gruppen ausschieden lassen, nicht aber eine im Einzelnen irgend genaue chronologische Anordnung aufgestellt werden kann, ist mir immer klarer geworden, je öfter und genauer ich den Qorân untersucht habe. Manches Indicium, das ich mir zu diesem Zwecke gemerkt hatte, hat sich mir als unzuverlässig bewiesen, und Manches, was ich früher las ziemlich gewiss behaupten zu dürfen glaubte, erwies sich bei wiederholter und sorgfältigerer Prüfung als unsicher' (*Geschichte* (1860) p. 59; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 74).

48 As he writes in his preface, *Geschichte* (1909), p. vii.

49 *Geschichte* (1860), p. 64.

50 'Ob freilich Sûre 96, 1–5 das älteste aller Qorânstücke ist muss dahingestellt bleiben … Ihrem Inhalt nach lassen sich die Worte vielmehr aus jeder Zeit verstehen, in der dem Propheten ein neuer Abschnitt aus dem himmlischen Buche mitgeteilt wurde' (*Geschichte* (1909), p. 83).

51 'Nachdem Muhammed sich zum Propheten berufen fühlte, war er doch, wie es scheint, seiner Sache noch keineswegs sicher' (*Geschichte* (1909), p. 84). This sentence is, of course, a reformulation of Nöldeke's (*Geschichte* (1860), p. 66).

52 Another example of puzzling textual grafts can be found in the commentary on Q. 5:73, where Schwally seems uncomfortable with Nöldeke's argument although he does not reject it completely: see *Geschichte* (1860), p. 130; and *Geschichte* (1909), p. 175.

53 *Geschichte* (1860), p. 45; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 58.

54 See, for example, *Geschichte* (1909), p. 91, p. 218, p. 212, p. 220, p. 225.

55 See *Geschichte* (1909), p. 92 and p. 150. For a comparison with Nöldeke's position in 1860 regarding these passages, see respectively *Geschichte* (1860), p. 73 and p. 111.

56 Q. 4:106–15 in Flügel's edition of the Qur'an, and as quoted by Nöldeke and Schwally.

57 *Geschichte* (1909), p. 203. Nöldeke in 1860 supports this traditional account; see *Geschichte* (1860), p. 151.

58 Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998), pp. 5–25.

59 Although some of Nöldeke's positions can be ascribed to the 'boldness of youth' ('jugendliche Keckheit', as he writes himself in the preface to the second edition of the *Geschichte*, p. vii), he did sustain a source-critical approach all through his life. See his article criticising Henri Lammens' over-critical approach (Theodor Nöldeke, 'Die Tradition über das Leben Muhammeds', *Der Islam* 5 (1914), pp. 160–70).

60 Compare for example Nöldeke's and Schwally's presentation of Sura 19: while Nöldeke states that it is the earliest to mention the name of Jesus, Schwally minimises this assertion by adding 'or, at least, one of the earliest' ('oder wenigestens eine der ältesten') (*Geschichte* (1860), p. 99, *Geschichte* (1909), p. 130).

61 For an interesting and, indeed, puzzling example of how the *Geschichte*'s chronology can be used in thematic study of the Qur'an, see Robinson's rapid and experimental survey of the changing identity of female companions to believers in the hereafter (Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, pp. 87–9). Others scholars reducing the *Geschichte*'s table of contents to a chronological list, although they themselves do not use it in conducting thematic studies of the Qur'an, are Bell (*Introduction to the Qur'an*, pp. 110–14) and Welch (art. 'al-Ḳurʾān', pp. 416–7). See as well T. O'Shaughnessy's numerous article on Qur'anic terms and notions analysed chronologically, for example 'The Seven Names for Hell in the Qur'ān', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 24:3 (1961), pp. 444–69; 'The Qur'ānic View of Youth and Old Age', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 141 (1991), pp. 33–53. Although he ultimately uses Blachère's chronological reordering – in his own words, 'the arrangement of the suras made by Nöldeke-Schwally and improved by Bell and especially by Blachère' ('The Seven Names for Hell', p. 447) – the same comments, developed below, apply. More recently, in his study of the relationship between believers and unbelievers, David Marshall also relies on Nöldeke's chronology, though he takes into consideration Blachère's contribution (David Marshall, *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers: A Qur'anic Study* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999), in particular pp. 21–2).

62 *Geschichte* (1860) p. 93; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 121.

63 'V. 17 scheint schon Sûra 77, 12ff vorauszusetzzen, und daher die Sûra jünger, als jene' (*Geschichte* (1860), p. 82; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 104).

64 *Geschichte* (1860), p. 85–6; *Geschichte* (1909), pp. 110–1, although Schwally does insist a little bit more than his predecessor on a probable early date for Q. 113 and Q. 114.

65 See Montgomery Watt: 'the chief weakness of Nöldeke's scheme, however, is that he mostly treats suras as unities' (W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ân* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), p. 111).

66 Lately, the view that suras are literary units has been advanced by an array of different but converging studies, see Neuwirth's pioneering *Studien* and, more recently, 'Vom Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon. Zu Entstehung und Wiederauflösung der Surenkomposition im Verlauf der Entwicklung eines islamischen Kultus' in S. Wild (ed.), *The Qurʾān as Text* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 69–105; Neal Robinson, 'Hands Outstretched: Towards a Re-reading of *Sūrat al-Māʾida*', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 2:1 (2001), pp. 89–106; S.M.S. El-Awa, *Textual Relations in the Qur'an: Relevance, Coherence and*

Structure (London: Routledge, 2006); Michael Cuypers, *Le Festin: Une lecture de la sourate al-Mâ'ida* (Paris: Lethielleux, 2007). Previously, the opposite view of the composite nature of suras was particularly asserted by Bell (*The Qur'an*) and Welch (art. 'al-Ḳurʾān', p. 418).

67 'Wir wollen so viel als möglich die chronologische Reihenfolge innehalten, jedoch werden einzelne Stellen, die einer anderen Zeit angehören, besser bei ihren Sûren aufgeführt, um diese nicht zu sehr zu zerreissen' (Geschichte (1860), p. 51; Geschichte (1909), p. 65). The expression 'heap of material' is taken from Angelika Neuwirth, 'Qur'an and History – A Disputed Relationship: Some Reflections on Qur'anic History and History in the Qur'an', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 5:1 (2003), pp. 1–18, p. 6. See also Blachère's similar view: 'ce procédé conduirait tout droit à une dislocation des sourates qui, menée à son terme logique, aboutirait à un émiettement total de la Vulgate' (Blachere, *Introduction au Coran*, p. 256).

68 See *Geschichte* (1860), p. 83, p. 115, p. 158; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 105, p. 154, p. 213. Nöldeke places Sura 22 near the end of the Medinan period. See also *Geschichte* (1860), p. 46; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 59, where he states that Muslim chronological lists only take into account the beginning of the suras, and adds, in a note, that this is also 'the only thinkable way to chronologically order suras which are partly composite in nature'.

69 'Mit letzterer [sura 81] wollen wir Sûr. 53 … verbinden, obgleich sie einerseits zu den spätern der ersten Periode, anderseits nicht zu dieser dritten Abtheilung gehört; beide hängen aber durch ihren Inhalt zusammen, indem in beiden vom Erscheinen des Engels geredet wird' (*Geschichte* (1860), p. 79; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 99 (slight reformulation)). Nöldeke's awkward formulation highlights once again his ambiguity regarding his chronological ordering: to what extent does his presentation of suras of the first Meccan period, divided in three thematic groups, follow chronological and/or thematic considerations? This citation is Nöldeke's only suggestion that the third group, consisting of apocalyptic suras, might also gather the *last* suras of this period. Earlier, he clearly states that, as most suras of the first period are impossible to arrange chronologically, he is ordering them according to their content: see *Geschichte* (1860), p. 73; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 91.

70 Hirschfeld, *New Researches*, pp. 120–4.

71 'Die 109 … gehört gewiss nicht in der erste Periode, sondern in die zweite, wo Mohammeds Lehre doch schon so um sich gegriffen hatte, daß die Götzendiener ihm einige Koncessionen machen wollten' (Weil, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung*, p. 60). See Welch's mistake in his art. 'al-Ḳurʾān', p. 416. Similarly, Welch also misreads Weil's ordering of the Suras 53 and 81; see Weil, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung*, p. 59.

72 The notions presented here of 'writing' and 'narrative' strategies could be related to the well-known distinction in the literary sub-discipline of narratology between the 'plot' and the 'story' (or '*sjuzhet*' and '*fabula*' as first conceptualised by the Russian formalists). The American literary theorist Jonathan Culler suggests, in reverse order, the terms 'story' – 'a sequence of actions or events, conceived as independent of their manifestation in discourse', and 'discourse' – 'the discursive presentation or narration of events', which could be said to be perfectly applicable here. See Johnathan D. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, 2nd edn, (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 189.

73 *Geschichte* (1860), p. 136; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 185, with some additions by Schwally.

74 'Aus 22 f. geht, daß Muhammad zur Zeit der Abfassung im Unglück war; wir setzen daher die Sura am wahrscheinlichsten in die Zeit zwischen der Uḥudschlacht und dem Grabenkriege' (*Geschichte* (1860), p. 145; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 195).

75 *Geschichte* (1860), p. 142; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 192. Q. 3:107 in Flügel's edition and as quoted in the *Geschichte*.

76 'So much is at least sure, that they belong to a time when Muḥammad was encountering difficulties, that is between the Battle of Uḥud and the end of the Battle of the Trench' ('So Viel ist wenigstens gewiss, daß sie einer Zeit zuzuschreiben sind, in der es Muhammad schlecht ging, d.h. der Periode zwischen der Schalcht am Uḥud und dem Ende des Grabenskampfes') (*Geschichte* (1860), p. 157; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 211–2). Q. 24:45–56 in Flügel's edition and as quoted in the *Geschichte*. Other passages dated in this way include Q. 2:155 (Flügel, Q. 2:150; *Geschichte* (1860), p. 131; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 177) and Q. 4:71–83 (Flügel, Q. 4:73–85; *Geschichte* (1860), p. 149; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 201).

77 For example, *Geschichte* (1860), p. 51; *Geschichte* (1909), p. 65.

78 Schöller, art. 'Post-Enlightenment Academic Study', p. 192.

79 Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, pp. 95–6. See also Gerhard Böwering, art. 'Chronology and the Qurʾān' in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*; Welch, art. 'al-Ḳurʾān'; Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, p. 114.

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