Classical Arabic Biography

The heirs of the prophets in the age of al-Ma’mūn

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# Contents

*Preface*  xi  
*Acknowledgements*  xiv  
*List of abbreviations*  xvi  
*Note on transliteration*  xvii  
*Note on dating systems*  xviii  
*Glossary*  xix  

1 The development of the genre  1  
2 The caliph al-Ma’mūn  24  
3 The Imam ‘Alī al-Riḍā  70  
4 The Ḥadīth-scholar Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal  107  
5 The renunciant Bishr al-Ḥāfī  154  
   Conclusions  188  

*Appendix*  The circumstances of ‘Alī al-Riḍā’s death  193  
*Bibliography*  197  
*Index*  211
ANDREW: I want to return to this generation. I want to know about your life as a shaykh.
SHAYKH KHALAF: About me? About my life?
ANDREW: Yes.
SHAYKH KHALAF: Yes. At first there was [the tribe of] 'Abbad. The shaykh of 'Abbad back then was Kayid Ibn Khatlan. Shaykh of the shaykhs of 'Abbad . . .

From Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan*\

**Akhbār, Ḥadīth, and Sīra**

Until recently, modern scholarship (following Otto Loth) has tended to assume that classical Arabic biography arose in conjunction with the study of Ḥadīth and Ḥadīth-transmitters. Muslim scholars, we are told, set out to collect information on the reliability of transmitters. Eventually they extended their inquiries “to other groups – legal scholars, doctors, Sufi masters, and so on,” with the intention of showing “that the history of the Muslim community was essentially that of the unbroken transmission of truth and high Islamic culture.” This understanding of the genre is accurate in some respects: classical Arabic biography undoubtedly emphasizes the notion of transmission, and some of the earliest collections do list transmitters of Ḥadīth. Yet the genre itself did not originate among the Ḥadīth-scholars. Were this so, we would expect the earliest compilations to consist exclusively of entries about transmitters. But, as Willi Heffening was the first to note, biographical collections on poets, singers, Qur‘ān-readers, and jurisprudents are at least as old as the ones on Ḥadīth-scholars. Even older are the biographies

1 Shryock, *Nationalism*, 12.
2 Loth, “Ursprung.” Here and throughout I use “Ḥadīth” and “Ḥadīth-scholars,” not “tradition” and “traditionists,” for the reasons cogently expounded in Hodgson, *Venture*, I: 63–66.
4 Heffening, “Ṭabaqāt.”
(maghāzī, then sıra) of the Prophet, which had attained a substantial bulk even before the appearance of Ḥadīth-biography.

This precocious variety assumes greater plausibility if we acknowledge that biography originated among those narrators, transmitters, and redactors whom Ibn al-Nadim (d. before 388/998) calls al-akhbārīyūn wa l-nassābūn wa-āṣhābū l-siyar wa l-ahdāth, “collectors of reports, genealogists, and authors of biographies and [accounts of] events.” These figures, most conveniently designated akhbārīs or “collectors of reports,” first rose to prominence at the court of the Umayyad caliph Muʿāwiya (r. 41–60/661–80). They professed expertise in the pagan sciences of genealogy, poetry, and pre-Islamic tribal history. Some of them were also authorities on the life and times of the Prophet – that is, the corpus of reports from which both sıra and Ḥadīth proper were later to emerge. The akhbārīs’ earliest works – when there were “works” at all? – exist only in later citations. Nevertheless, it is possible to reconstruct the ways in which they defined the directions early Arabic historiography, including biography, was to take.

Much of the information collected by the akhbārīs consisted of or included lists of names, often in the form of genealogies. Indeed, the citation of genealogies was almost impossible to avoid. This is because Arabic names typically contained a series of patronymics (expressions like “son of” and “daughter of”) going back many generations. As a result, practically every name contained a family history that could serve as the nucleus of a collective biography. When they mention a person, the early akhbārīs frequently pause to comment on the ancestors mentioned in his genealogy. Alternatively, they start at the beginning of a family tree and tell a brief story about some or all of the figures in the list, as Shaykh Khalaf does in his interview with Shryock. The utility of such performances, then as now, is to serve as an armature for narratives and poetry that support tribal claims to past glories and present rights. Unless the interlocutor is familiar with the reputation of one’s ancestors, an unadorned list of names is not an effective genealogy. The minimal and possibly the earliest sort of Arabic biography thus appears to have consisted of a genealogy accompanied by a narrative. Werner Caskel, and before him Ignaz Goldziher, noted the close association of genealogy (nasab) and narration (qass) in premodern Arabic literature. More recently, Shryock has demonstrated the interdependence of the two forms in the oral histories of the Jordanian Bedouin. Plausibly enough, bare lists do appear when the narra-

7 See, e.g., Leder’s reservations on the “books” attributed to al-Haytham (Korpus, 8ff.).
8 See, e.g., Ibn Hazm, Jamhara, passim, e.g., 117; for contemporary parallels, see Shryock, Nationalism, e.g., 51–52.
9 Goldziher, Muslim Studies, I: 168, 170; Caskel, Ǧamḥara, I: 35.
tor does not wish to pronounce in favor of one or another tribe. In Jordan, Shryock found that tribal histories (that is, performances of nasab and qasṣ) inevitably challenge the claims made by neighboring clans and tribes. The tribal ‘ulamā’ (as his informants are called) were reluctant to relate their histories for fear of provoking a hostile reaction from neighboring rivals. After one eight-hour session with a tribal ‘ālim, Shryock reports that he succeeded in recording only a bare genealogy: the narrative component had “collapsed under the weight” of participants’ efforts to “negotiate an acceptable version.”11 In many cases, the bare lists we find in early Arabic sources may have been compiled by akhbārīs working long after particular disputes had been settled or forgotten. In other cases, they may be artifacts of a written history that strove to maintain neutrality.

Besides genealogies, the early sources contain lists (tasmiyāt) of persons credited with particular occupations or unusual feats or attributes. Some of these lists appear to date back to pre-Islamic times: they name tribal celebrities such as arbiters, trackers, and even “men whose big toes dragged on the ground when they rode.”12 As Stefan Leder has noted, such lists, like genealogies, “give expression to the perception of closed and independently acting social units.”13 In the Islamic period, the akhbārīs applied a similar principle of classification to a wider range of persons. These persons included prophets, Companions, caliphs, Successors, jurisprudents, Ḥadīth-scholars, Qur’ān-readers, transmitters of poetry and rare expressions, schoolteachers, participants in feuds, people who were the first to do a certain thing, and people afflicted with leprosy, lameness, and other maladies.14 Because the placeholders in incidental lists were not necessarily related in any other way, compilers frequently added identifying remarks (akhbār) like those appended to genealogies.15 Again, the bare listing of names is a theoretical possibility, occasionally realized. More commonly, however, we find narration, or at least description, appended to some or all of the items in the list.

As the genealogies and tasmiyāt indicate, the first Arabic biographers (i.e., the akhbārīs) did not confine themselves to collecting information about Ḥadīth-scholars. Heffening’s discovery of early works on poets, singers, and the like confirms this view. Still, the oldest extant collection, the Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā, does appear to be a catalogue of Ḥadīth-transmitters. Compiled by al-Wāqidī (d. 207/822) and Ibn Sa’d (d. 230/845), the Ṭabaqāt contains entries of widely varying length on Muslims of the first six generations. In many cases, it offers assessments of its subjects’ reliability as transmitters. However, it also contains many reports that have little bearing on reliability, as well as a substantial biography of the Prophet. This genre, certainly, is older than Ḥadīth-biography: a substantial maghāzī is attributed to Ibn Ishāq, who died in 150/767. At first glance, then, it appears that the compilers of the Ṭabaqāt

11 Shryock, Nationalism, chs. 4 and 5; citations on p. 108.
12 Ibn Hābīb, Muhābbat, 132, 189, 233. 13 Leder, Korpus, 199.
14 Ibn Qutayba, Ma‘ārif, passim. 15 E.g., Ibn Hishām, Sīra, III: 87.
adopted the sı́ra as well as the list-form from the akhbārīs. Upon closer examination, however, it seems more accurate to suggest that al-Wāqidī and Ibn Sa’d were akhbārīs, and that Ḥadīth-biography proper, while doubtless influenced by the example of the Ṭabaqāt, appeared later and under different circumstances.

To justify this assessment, we must look more closely at the circumstances under which Ḥadīth-studies emerged as a discipline distinct from the collection of akhbār. In the Umayyad period, “Ḥadīth” – that is, akhbār about the Prophet – had yet to attain the status of a distinct body of texts. Of the akhbārīs active in Medina and Damascus in the early third/ninth century, we find several who claimed expertise in subjects that included, without special distinction, the corpus later codified as Ḥadīth. For example, the Damascene akhbārī Muḥammad b. Muslim al-Zuhrī (d. 124/741) is credited with knowledge of the Prophet’s campaigns (maghāzī), post-prophetic history, and “Ḥadīth.”16 The sweeping nature of this declaration suggests that his contemporaries had yet to enforce any strict classification of sı́ra-related topics.17 Al-Zuhrī himself was reportedly the first to use isnāds (lists of transmitters) to check the genuineness of Ḥadīth. G. H. A. Juynboll agrees that the systematic examination of authorities began at that time (c. 130/747, with Shu’ba b. al-Hajjāj). However, he places the “structured collection” of Ḥadīth rather later: the two earliest compilers of musnads (books of Ḥadīth arranged by transmitter) both died in 228/847.18 The tardy but seemingly abrupt appearance of Ḥadīth proper has been corroborated by Joseph Schacht, who notes that the Iraqi jurist Abū Yūṣuf (d. 182/798) commonly cited historical reports of juridical import without isnāds, while his younger contemporary al-Shāfi’ī (d. 204/820) differentiated between Prophetic biography and “legal traditions” (i.e., Ḥadīth) because only the latter had good isnāds.19 The implication is that the strict division between Ḥadīth and other kinds of history, that is, sı́ra, maghāzī, and akhbār, came late but took hold, in this case at least, within a single generation.

The new insistence on Ḥadīth as a distinct category, and on the isnād as a necessary concomitant of historical narration, evidently caught the akhbārīs off guard. One of them, ‘Awāna b. al-Ḥakam (d. 147/764–65 or 158/774–75) is reported to have said: “I gave up Ḥadīth because I couldn’t stand the isnād.”20 Even in the middle of the third/ninth century, by which time the akhbārīs had given up Ḥadīth, the scholars insisted on denouncing them. Al-Bukhārī and Yahyā b. Maʿīn, for example, called Ibn al-Haytham a liar, and al-Dāraquṭnī labeled Ibn al-Kalbī mattrūk “abandoned” as a transmitter.21 In some cases, the critics appear to be condemning the akhbārīs’ ignorance of Ḥadīth proper, and in other cases deploiring their failure to apply Ḥadīth-standards to the

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19 Schacht, Origins, 75 and 139. 20 MU, IV: 513; Ibn al-Nadīm, Fihrist, 134.
21 MU, V: 606; 5: 595.
Prophet’s biography and other historical narratives. Either way, it is clear that the Ḥadīth-scholars were the newcomers, and that their professional self-definition required condemnation of the older aḵbārī tradition.\(^{22}\)

Most misleadingly for us, the Ḥadīth-men also retrojected their criticism upon aḵbārīs of previous generations. Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767), for example, was regarded as an authority by his contemporary al-Zuhrī. A century later, however, he was censured by Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) for “leaving things out and changing them” in his recitation of the Prophet’s campaigns.\(^{23}\) Similarly, the so-called “Ḥadīth” of Abū Mīkhnaf (d. 157/774) was declared “worthless” by Yahyā b. Maʿīn (d. 233/847).\(^{24}\) This pattern of retrospective condemnation has created the false impression that the early aḵbārīs were sloppy Ḥadīth-scholars, and indeed that such a thing as “Ḥadīth” existed as a disciplined canon in the early period at all.

Ironically, however, it was precisely the formalization of Ḥadīth-criteria that left the Prophet’s sīra and the allied biographical and historical genres in the hands of the aḵbārīs. By the early third/ninth century, the Ḥadīth-scholars had committed their texts to compilations arranged by transmitter or by theme.\(^{25}\) In either format, the Ḥadīth was now severed from the sequential narrative of the Prophet’s biography. Admittedly, a given Ḥadīth remained formally identical to a report in the sīra: both consisted of a listing of transmitters culminating in a first-person eyewitness account, often in multiple versions. Yet the Ḥadīth-reports were now arranged by transmitter or by subject (e.g., prayer, inheritance, contracts, etc.), while the reports in the sīra remained a sequential set of narratives.\(^{26}\) With these boundaries in place, the aḵbārīs could produce Prophetic biographies without falling afoul of the Ḥadīth-scholars.\(^{27}\) Thus al-Wāqidi (d. 207/822) was called “an authority on the Prophet’s biography (al-magḥāzī wa ‘l-sīyār), the conquests, and disputed matters of Ḥadīth, jurisprudence, and aḵbār.” Not surprisingly, “a number of Ḥadīth-scholars considered him weak,” a typical reaction – as we have seen – to such broad expertise. Yet even those who questioned his knowledge of Ḥadīth were willing to concede his authority in other fields. “As far as biography (aḵbār al-nāṣ wa ‘l-sīyar), jurisprudence, and the other sciences are

\(^{22}\) See also Robinson, “Study,” esp. 206.

\(^{23}\) Ibn Ḥanbal, ‘Ilal, I:17 and I: 22; Ibn al-Nadīm, Fīhrīst, 136; MU, V: 220; Abbot, Studies, I: 87–91. Ibn Ishāq was condemned in his own time, but not for his isnāds: his major contemporary critic, Mālik b. Anas, did not always use them himself (Robson, “Ḥadīth”). Although some later authorities spoke approvingly of Ibn Ishāq (Guillaume, Life, xxxv–xxxvi), such assessments were often arbitrary (Juynboll, Muslim Tradition, 163–90), reinforcing the sense that we are dealing with collective self-assertion through aḵbārī-bashing rather than strictly individual assessments of transmitters. \(^{24}\) Ibn al-Nadīm, Fīhrīst, 136–37; MU, V: 29.

\(^{25}\) The first musnadāt are credited to Yahyā b. Ḥabīb, Musaddab b. Musardad (both d. 228/847) and Nuʿaym b. Hammad b. Muʿāwiya (d. 229/848). Juynboll, Muslim Tradition, 22 (on Musaddab see also Goldziher, Muslim Studies, II: 139, note 3).

\(^{26}\) See further Wansbrough, Sectarian Milieu, 77ff.

\(^{27}\) On the mutual respect eventually established on the basis of this division of labor, see Schacht, Origins, 139, and note 6.
concerned, he is a reliable authority by consensus.”Similarly, his scribe and successor Ibn Sa’d (d. 230/845) was called “an expert in the akhbar of the Companions and Successors,” not a Hadith-scholar. Admittedly, the Tabaqāt the two men produced is well supplied with isnāds, indicating that Ibn Sa’d, at least, had mastered the evidentiary protocol of the Hadith-scholars. However, as Juynboll has pointed out, the book contains “hardly any” material that falls into the category of Hadith, not even in the biographies of Companions in whose entries one would expect to find it. The contents of the Tabaqāt thus illustrate the extent to which the earliest biographies, even of the Prophet, were the work of akhbarīs, not Hadith-scholars proper.

As the contents of the Tabaqāt indicate, the akhbarīs had assumed authority over the biography of the Prophet as well as the lives of the Companions and Successors. It is clear why: in the beginning at least, the compilation of a Prophetic biography required expertise in pre-Islamic genealogy and history, fields that had long been the acknowledged province of the akhbarīs. In later periods, the closest parallel to the contents of the sīra does not appear in the writings of the Hadith-scholars, but rather in the works of akhbarīs, particularly al-Madā’inī (d. 225/839–40). Al-Madā’inī is clearly an akhbarī: his works deal with the history of Quraysh, the conquests, caliphs, poets, and such odd subjects as wedding parties, coinage, and persons famous for their propensity to flatulence. To him are also attributed twenty-seven works on the Prophet, covering his physical appearance, his sermons and letters, his enemies and detractors, his military campaigns, the delegations he sent to the tribes, etc. The subject matter of the latter works thus corresponds to the contents of the earliest known recensions of the Prophet’s biography (those by Ibn Ishāq and Ibn Sa’d). These topics include pre-Islamic Arabian history, the Prophet’s mission, the resistance to Islam, the emigration to Medina, and Muhammad’s negotiations and military campaigns.

Biography, then, originated among akhbarīs, not Hadith-scholars proper, who in the early third/ninth century had barely come into existence as writers of books. By the third/ninth century if not earlier, scholars exclusively interested in Hadith had begun to condemn the akhbarīs, including those of older generations, for failing to uphold the newly emerged rules for Hadith-transmission. At the same time, they conceded to their akhbarī contemporaries the right to compose biographies, including those of the Prophet. This entente appears to have succeeded in part because many akhbarīs had acquired competence in the evidentiary protocol of Hadith.

Professional specialization and collective biography

The history of akhbar after c. 200/800 becomes the history of the diffuse fields of specialization that emerged from it. These include not only Hadith but also

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28 Ibn al-Nadim, Fihrist, 144; MU, V: 392–93. Note that fiqh in this period did not necessarily entail knowledge of Hadith.
29 Ibn al-Nadim, Fihrist, 145.
the various branches of adab (the literary and linguistic sciences) and of ta’rīkh (history). Many of these branches developed their own biographical traditions. Common to all the traditions was the notion of descent, now understood as a metaphorical rather than a literal genealogy. An examination of early biographical writing, whether by akhbāris or Ḥadīth-scholars, bears out one element of Hourani’s contention that biographers intended to establish “unbroken transmission.” However, this transmission did not always have to do with “truth,” as Hourani proposes. More exactly, it had to do with knowledge, an attribute of poets and singers as well as of Ḥadīth-transmitters. As we have seen, the Ḥadīth-men insisted on evaluating transmitters as well as (or instead of) the reports they transmitted. Similarly, biographers of musicians, poets, and grammarians felt the need to compile a catalogue of experts in their respective disciplines. In the apologetic prefaces they attached to their works, the adab-biographers made explicit what was implicit in Ḥadīth-biography, namely, the notion that professional legitimacy derived from the documented transmission of knowledge.

Rijāl-works and Ḥadīth-biography

The earliest biographical tradition particular to Ḥadīth-studies is the rijāl-collection, which consists of a list of persons named as authorities in the transmission of reports. One of the oldest extant examples confirms Heffening’s suggestion that the genre represents a “special application” of techniques of composition already in use among akhbāris. This is the Ṭabaqāt of Khalīfa b. Khayyāt (d. 240/854–55), which groups transmitters by generation, tribe, and place of residence. Khalīfa also compiled a chronological history, and may therefore be considered an akhbārī of sorts. However, neither his history nor his Ṭabaqāt contains much akhbār. In the Ṭabaqāt, the information most important for Ḥadīth-purposes – namely, where and when the transmitter was active – must be inferred from the placement of that transmitter’s name in the generational, tribal, and regional classes.

Much more detailed is the ʻIḥl wa-maʼrifat al-rijāl ascribed to Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855). However, its compilers evince little awareness of the organizational techniques in use among akhbāris: the imam’s comments on transmitters and texts are placed in whatever order they happened to be spoken during Ḥadīth-sessions. A roughly contemporary work, the Ṭarīkh of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) takes the transmitters’ names as the unit of organization and lists them alphabetically for easy reference. Al-Bukhārī’s entries are invariably brief, mentioning only the subject’s teachers and students, e.g.: “Ismā‘īl b. Sa‘īd b. Rummāna al-Yamānī; he heard Ibn ʻUmar; Yūsuf b. ʻAbd al-Šamad related on his authority.”33 The fragments of rijāl-criticism ascribed to al-ʻIjī (d. 261/875) are only slightly more forthcoming: one transmitter, he says, was “a harsh and ill-natured man, but he knew the sunna.”34 As these examples

32 For a list of rijāl-works see Juynboll, “Rijāl.”
33 Bukhārī, Ṭarīkh, I: 1: 356; no. 1126.
34 Cited in Muryani, “Entwicklung,” 61.
indicate, the rījāl-critics had little interest in akhbār as such. Their comments are ascriptive rather than narrative, and almost always bear on the subject’s reliability as a transmitter. This does not mean that the tradition could not grow: on the contrary, the contentious nature of Hadith-criticism produced a farrago of judgements, pro and con, that had to be appended to the entries on individual transmitters. This process eventually culminated in the massive compilations of al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) and Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1449). However, it did not result in anecdotal biography of the sort found in Ibn Sa’d’s Ṭabaqāt. Even the long entries in late rījāl-books favor laconic assessments (albeit a great many of them) over extended narratives.

With the appearance of distinct schools of jurisprudence (madhāhib) came dictionaries devoted to their affiliates, who were often transmitters as well as jurists.35 Such compilations, unlike the rījāl-books, are not concerned with weeding out unreliable transmitters. Rather, the compilers were intent on demonstrating the distinctive attainments of their school. To the extent that such a project necessitated praising affiliates and criticizing rivals, some biographers collected anecdotes with as much enthusiasm as any akhbārī (for the Ḥanbalī tradition, see chapter 4). Others, however, were still interested only in the transmission of Hadith – not Hadith in general, but the sequence of teachers of which they formed a part. As a result, their works consist of name-lists supplemented with such minimal facts as death-dates, teachers, and students.

In a study of one such collection, Rudolf Sellheim suggests (following Ibrāhīm Madkūr) that the brevity of the entries is due to the “abashedness and humility” of the compilers.36 But this remark strictly speaking applies only to autobiography (and as it happens, is not true there either).37 I would argue rather that long entries on Hadith-scholars are only needed when membership in the group is being contested: that is, in rījāl-books. Lists of one’s own teachers, on the other hand, document a figurative genealogy back to the Prophet. Instead of parentage, the relevant relationship is the equally successive one of hearing and transmission. The implied narrative of succession to the Prophet, not the idiosyncrasies of any of the men named in the list, makes the best argument for one’s own authority to transmit Hadith. An endless series of nearly indistinguishable entries does not therefore fail to take account of individuality. Rather, it succeeds in excluding it.

Musicians

A more explicit example of collective self-assertion comes from al-Jāhīz’ (d. 776/868) compilation on musicians.38 The ancient philosophers, al-Jāhīz states, divided knowledge (ʿilm) into four arts (ādāb). Of the four, Muslim scholars

35 On the early history of madhab-biography, see Melchert, Formation, esp. 145–46.
36 Sellheim, “Izzaddīn.”
37 See Edebiyat VII: 2 (1997; special issue on Arabic autobiography).
quickly attained a precise knowledge of three: astronomy, geometry, and chemistry. Yet the fourth art, music (*luhūn, ghinā’*), suffered from neglect. People grasped its principles only by intuition, or by hearing of Persian and Indian ideas on the subject. Then al-Khaṭṭīb ʿAlī b. Aḥmad derived a metrical system for poetry and music. His system came to the attention of Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣūlī, who, with his greater experience as a performer and auditor, perfected it and made it into a science. Since then, every age has had its generation of musicians who learn from those before them, and who along with their musical skill cultivate various refinements of character. Unfortunately, biographers have not yet written about the celebrated musicians of al-Jāḥiẓ’ day. To give his contemporaries their due, he has composed an account of “their characteristics, their instruments, and the styles they attribute to themselves and pass on to others,” and arranged his account by *ṭabaqāt*, here meaning “categories of comparable excellence.” The biographies themselves have not survived, so the second part of al-Jāḥiẓ’ project— the narration of individual lives within a master-narrative for the musician class—cannot be studied. Nevertheless, his introduction provides a relatively early and complete instance of the etiological narrative, that is, the story a biographer tells to legitimize his category of subjects and lay the groundwork for his exposition of the virtues of individual exemplars within the category.

**Poets**

Early *akhbārīs* took a particular interest in poetry, which like music soon found its apologists. The early Islamic view of poets and poetry was preponderantly hostile. Although poetry survived the advent of Islam, it perforce renounced its claim to supernatural inspiration. Not surprisingly, the earliest biographers of poets do not adduce an etiology for their subjects. Instead, they argue for the importance of being able to identify good poetry, something mere amateurs cannot hope to do. In the earliest extant biographical work on poets, Ibn Sallām al-Jumāhī (d. 232/846) begins with a complaint about declining standards. “Much of the poetry one hears is contrived and fabricated,” he says, “no good at all, and no proof-text for correct Arabic.” This is because “people have passed it from book to book without taking it from the Bedouin and without submitting it to the judgement of scholars.” In response to a man who declares that he could appreciate a poem perfectly well without asking an expert, al-Jumāhī replies: “If you like a coin but the money-changer tells you it’s false, what good does your appreciation do you then?” His attitude parallels (but does not necessarily derive from) that of

40 On poetic biographies, see Tarabulusi, Critique; Sezgin, Geschichte, II: 92–97.
42 Jumāhī, Ṭabaqāt, 5–6.
43 Ibid., 8.
the Ḥadīth-scholars: antiquity and authenticity confer authority upon a text, the content of which cannot stand on its own merits without the imprimatur of the experts.

As in Hadīth-studies, too, the requirement of authenticity requires a foray into biography in order to establish the names and works of the most reliable authorities. Al-Jumāhī explains that he has “classified the poets of the pre-Islamic, Islamic, and transitional periods, and ranked them.” The result is “ten classes of four poets of equal skill.” Unlike Ibn Sa’d and Khalīfa, al-Jumāhī constructs his ṯabaqāt on the basis of excellence, not geography or age. Excellence, in turn, depends on the twin criteria of authenticity and quality. Some poems and poets are more authentic than others: ancients more than moderns, and desert-dwellers more than urbanites. Within each category, moreover, some poets are better than others, and here explicitly aesthetic considerations play a role. Imru’ al-Qays, for example, is superior to other equally authentic (i.e., old) poets because “he invented things that no one had said before, things that the Arabs considered beautiful.” Any biographical elaboration beyond these minimal facts is not necessary for a critical discussion of the verses. Most of the entries, accordingly, contain citations of poems rather than anecdotes.

A biographer of the next generation, Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), offers a more explicit justification for his work. Cultivated people, he says, refer to poetry when discussing “usage, grammar, the Qur’ān, and the Ḥadīth.” Like al-Jumāhī, Ibn Qutayba conflates this philological standard with a literary one, for which he regards the ancients as the highest model. Provided they respect convention, however, some modern poets may attain parity with the ancients:

I do not consider the ancient poets any more favorably because they are old, nor do I think any less of recent poets because they are new. Rather, I consider both groups without bias, and give each its due. I have seen scholars who approve of, and anthologize, poor poetry just because the person who composed it lived a long time ago. I have also seen them denigrate solid poetry only because it was composed in their own time, or by someone they have actually seen. But God has not restricted knowledge, poetic talent, and eloquence to one age as opposed to another, nor has He made it the special property of one people while denying it to another. Rather, He has divided it and made it the common property of all His creatures in all ages, and made everything ancient modern in its time, just as every noble line has a humble origin. After all, Jarīr, al-Farazdaq, al-Akhtāl, and others like them were once considered modern.

This bold statement has the effect of extending the biographer’s field down to his own time and then leaving it open for his successors. Indeed, Ibn Qutayba’s chronological arrangement permits future compilers to append biographies

45 Jumāhī, ṯabaqāt, 21–22. The actual arrangement is somewhat different, due perhaps to later interpolations (see Shākir’s introduction, 20–21).
46 Ibid., p. 47.
without disturbing the structure of the work, something al-Jumahī’s *tabaqāt*-scheme makes impossible. Moreover, by using the poet’s death-date, not the quality or ancientness of his verses, as his axis of organization, Ibn Qutayba foregrounds the poet as the subject of interest. Unlike al-Jumahī’s entries, which contain little more than verses, Ibn Qutayba’s include information on “the poets and their times, their abilities, their modes of composition, their tribes, the names of their fathers, and those who were known by nicknames or honorifics,” as well as the events that prompted the composition of their poems.48 Mere names, he says, convey little unless accompanied by “a tale, a historical event, a genealogy, an anecdote, or a verse deemed good or unusual.”49

Ibn Qutayba may have opened the pages of biography to the modern poets, but it was another biographer, Ibn al-Mu‘tazz (d. 296/908), who treated them as subjects worthy of commemoration in their own right. In his *Tābaqāt al-shu‘arā’ al-muhādithīn*, Ibn al-Mu‘tazz treats only the poets of the Abbasid period, and goes even further than Ibn Qutayba in citing biographical reports as well as verses. In the anecdotes, he pleads the cause of the “modern” poets by suggesting a continuity between them and their ancient predecessors. Like the ancients, the moderns were given to strange mannerisms, debauchery, and the flouting of convention. The poet Abū al-Hindī, for example, died by falling off a roof in a drunken stupor, Abū Nuwās composed verse while intoxicated, and Abū Dulāma went carousing instead of accompanying his patron on the pilgrimage.50 In his critical comments on the verses, Ibn al-Mu‘tazz does not refer to “ancientness” or “authenticity.” Instead, he repeatedly praises *badi‘*, the characteristic literary device of the moderns.51 In another work, the *Kitāb al-badi‘*, he argues that *badi‘* appears in the Qur’ān, the Hadith, and ancient poetry, and modern critics have no right to repudiate their contemporaries who employ it. In the *Tabaqāt*, he points out examples of *badi‘* and praises the work of poets known to have favored the technique.52 Distributed as they are throughout the biographical entries, his comments add up to a practical characterization of the technique, an endorsement of it, and by extension, a vindication of his subject, the modern poets. Evidently his project was successful: by the time Abū al-Faraj composed his *Kitāb al-aghānī* (d. 356/967) it was acceptable to treat the ancients and the moderns together as subjects of biography, and in no particular order at all.

**Grammarians**

Like Hadith-studies and poetical criticism, the sciences of language crystallized as a distinct discipline at a relatively early date. The first known

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48 Ibid., I: 59–60. For an example see Leder, “Frühe Erzählungen.”
52 E.g., Bashshār b. Burd (21–31), Muslim b. al-Walīd (235–40), and Abū Tammām (283–87).
biographical works on grammarians are nearly as old as the early works on Hadîth-scholars and poets.⁵³ Among the earliest extant is that of al-Marzubânî (d. 368/979 or 384/994), transmitted in an abridgement by al-Hâfiż al-Yaghmurî (d. 673/1274). The original reportedly contained biographies of genealogists as well as language scholars, but the work as it stands is dominated by a concern for grammar and grammarians.⁵⁴ On the assumption that its abridgement omits rather than adds material, al-Marzubânî’s work performed two signal services for the grammarians. First, it justifies grammar by characterizing it as a guardianship of the Arabic language, the medium of God’s Revelation to Muḥammad and of the Prophet’s Hadîth. Second, it documents the founder’s transmission of this trust to his successors. Just like Hadîth-scholars, poets, and musicians, the grammarians could lay claim to a distinctive ‘ilm conveyed intact through the generations.

Al-Marzubânî begins with a series of statements attributed to the Prophet and other prominent historical figures exhorting believers to cultivate good pronunciation and grammar. Then he recounts one anecdote after another showing Muslims, notable and otherwise, committing solecisms. After the last anecdote – in which Abû ‘Amr b. al-‘Alâ‘ (d.155/772) deplores the miswritten sign-boards of the cotton-traders – al-Marzubânî brings in his hero Abû al-Aswad al-Du‘alî (d. 69/688). Abû al-Aswad, he reports, learned the principles of desinential inflection from ‘Alî b. Abî Ţâlib. Later he was commissioned by the governor Ziyâd b. Abîhi to teach people the vowel-markers “because their speech had deteriorated.” Abû al-Aswad ignored the commission until, one day, walking along the river-bank in Basra, he overheard a Qur‘ân reader misvowel a word and thus invert the meaning of a verse (Qur‘ân 9: 3). He then said to himself, “It is no longer permitted me to neglect the people!” and forthwith invented a transcription-system for the inflectional endings ‘Alî had taught him. “He made the nominative, the genitive, and the accusative; and people flocked to him to learn pure Arabic.”⁵⁵ This origin-tale, which occurs in several variants, displays a conspicuous constructedness.⁵⁶ Abû al-Aswad refuses to teach grammar, or is forbidden to do so. This prohibition serves merely to set the stage for what happens next, namely, that he overhears a particularly flagrant error and reverses his position, thereby rescuing a community on the verge of inglorious collapse due to its members’ ignorance of case inflection. Of course, he cannot really have done so, because several of the figures accused of committing solecisms lived long after his time.⁵⁷ Yet this inconsistency serves the biographer’s purpose as well: had Abû al-Aswad succeeded in eradicating error once and for all, there would be no need for more grammarians.

⁵³ Hafîsî, “Recherches,” 87; Mustafâ, Ta‘rîkh, I:222.
⁵⁴ See Makdîsî, Humanism, 165.
⁵⁶ On awâ’il see Noth and Conrad, Historical Tradition, 104–8; Juynboll, Muslim Tradition, 10ff.
⁵⁷ Abû al-Aswad died in 69, while e.g. Abû ‘Amr b. al-‘Alâ‘, who deplored the traders’ signs, died in 155.
Having described the origin and utility of prescriptive grammar, al-Marzubānī sets out to establish that Abū al-Aswād’s knowledge was transmitted to subsequent generations (yantaqilu ‘l-‘ilmu min tabaqaṭin ilā tabaqa). He thus reports that “the most outstanding of [Abū al-Aswād’s] disciples, and the most retentive, was ʻAnbasa b. Ma‘dān al-Fīl. When Abū al-Aswād died, the people flocked to ʻAnbasa. When he in turn died, people studied with his best-trained pupil, Maymūn al-Aqrān.”58 Each of those named will have an entry later in the book, and each entry will name the students who carried on the tradition in their turn. Sometimes, too, al-Marzubānī adds a story about how a particular figure came to join the class. The celebrated ʻSibawayh, for example, took up grammar when his Ḥadīth-teacher rebuked him for misusing the negative particle ʻlaysa. Like Ibn al-Mu‘tazz with his poets, al-Marzubānī enjoys stories that illustrate his subjects’ oddities. Even these stories, however, reinforce the distinct endowment of the grammarians. Abū ‘Amr b. al-ʻAlā’, for example, was happy to learn that al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf had died, not only because al-Ḥajjāj had been pursuing him, but also because the death-announcement illustrated the correct pronunciation of a difficult word. Another grammarian, ʻĪsā b. ʻUmar, was punished for refusing to return some clothing left with him for safekeeping; even as he was being caned, he used two unusual diminutives to protest his chastisement.59

The early biographical compilations on Ḥadīth-scholars, musicians, poets, and grammarians illustrate the formation of what Leder has called literarische Personengruppen, a “secondary theme” of early historiography (to apply Noth and Conrad’s terminology) which reflects the increasing professionalization of Muslim scholarship after the second/eighth century.60 The Ḥadīth-scholars compiled lists of transmitters in quasi-genealogical chains going back to the Prophet, hoping thereby to affirm the authenticity of their reports. Al-Jāḥīṣ reached back to pre-Islamic times to dignify musicians. The biographers of poets and grammarians sought to justify their subjects’ privilege by invoking the connection between language and the Revelation. In each case, biographers insisted that the ṭā‘īfa met the dire need for experts in one field or another. By making a list of these experts, the biographers also made a case for their authority as critics. In adab as well as in Ḥadīth, the biographers considered their intervention a necessary concomitant of establishing new, self-defined fields of expertise.

The ṭā‘īfa model

Of all the reformulations of group identity that arose with Islam, the most productive one for biographers proved to be that of heirship to the Prophet.61

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58 Yaghmūrī, Nūr, 87. 59 Ibid., 95, 30, 46. 60 Leder, Korpus, 197ff; Noth and Conrad, Historical Tradition. 61 For the early development of this notion as a political and religious idea, see Nagel, Rechtleitung, to whom my debt will be obvious, especially in ch. 2 below.
The caliphs appear to have been the first to assume this mantle. This maneuver required suppressing the corresponding claims of Muhammad’s family, claims that were to resurface in the Shiite argument for heirship. However, not all the interpretations of Muhammad’s mandate were so absolute. Among the most influential was that of the Sufis, who proposed various plans for dividing the Prophet’s functions among his heirs. The most detailed plan is that of Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988–89), who divided “those who know” into three groups: Ḥadīth-scholars, legists, and Sufis. Each group (ṣīnḥ) specializes in a particular area – Ḥadīth, textual interpretation, and mysticism respectively. Each has its methods, technical terms, and exemplary practitioners. Furthermore, each group defers (or should defer) to the expertise of the others. Since al-Sarrāj was not a biographer, we cannot use his works to see how he would have applied his system to classify or write about historical individuals. But a similar blueprint for dividing religious practitioners into categories appears, at approximately the same time, in the work of another Sufi, Abū Tālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996), who based his scheme on a Prophetic Ḥadīth that divides the early Muslims into generations of forty years each.

According to Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), Abū Tālib “built upon” this Ḥadīth by listing the leading caliph, legist, Ḥadīth-scholar, Qur’ān-reader, and renunciant (zāhid) in each generation. The scheme appealed to subsequent scholars, who continued to fill in names for the later generations. The resulting catalogue covers fourteen generations, each forty years long, and names the outstanding practitioner in each of the five “aspects of religion” in each generation. In the fifth, for example, “the caliph . . . was al-Ma’mūn b. al-Rashīd; the legist was ‘Abd Allāh b. Idrīs al-Shāfī‘ī; the Ḥadīth-scholar was Yahyā b. Ma‘īn; the Qur’ān-reader was Yahyā al-Ḥadrāmī; and the renunciant was Ma‘rūf al-Karkhī.” Abū Tālib’s appropriation of the Prophet’s Ḥadīth presents the classical Arabic biographical project in microcosm. First, Abū Tālib proposes a division of religious practitioners. Unlike al-Sarrāj, he does not describe these groups as “heirs of the prophets,” but the principle of functional division is the same. Then, in the manner of al-Haytham b. ‘Adī, Ibn Hābīb, Ibn Qutayba, and other akhbārīs, he names representatives in each division. Organized by generation, the resulting catalogue is open ended, and can be (and indeed was) kept up to date by later transmitters. Such explicit divisions of religious practitioners into separate but complementary lineages may very plausibly have originated among Sufi theorists eager to carve out a place for themselves in a hierarchy unselfconsciously dominated by Ḥadīth-scholars and legists.

Whatever its origins, the division-of-labor model eventually became the most productive paradigm for collective biography. The most common term

64 Ibn al-Jawzī, Tulqīh, 382–84.
65 Mackeen, “Ṣūfī-Qawm”; Reinhart, “Transcendence,” 9–10; and ch. 5 below.
for the collectivities themselves is ṭāʾifā, “group entrusted with an exclusive body of knowledge or characteristic activity.” Yaqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 626/1229) applied the term to literary scholars, and Ibn Khallikān (d. 621/1282) to “scholars, kings, princes, viziers, and poets.” The longest catalogue is probably that of al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), who lists forty categories of persons about whom biographies have been written. They range from prophets and kings to lovers, lunatics, and gamblers. His younger contemporary al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1362) lists ten: Companions, Ḥadīth-scholars, caliphs, kings, officials, judges, Qurʾān-readers, scholars, poets, and a miscellaneous category that includes allies of God (awliyāʾ), preachers, physicians, astronomers, grammarians, theologians, and litterateurs. Al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), who represents the culmination of the classical tradition, mentions sixteen groups. They include prophets, Companions, exegetes of the Qurʾān, memorizers of the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth, grammarians and philologists, legal theorists, holy men, inheritance calculators, rhetoricians, legists, Qurʾān-readers, judges, and caliphs. As these examples show, a ṭāʾifā could be an actual occupational group as well as an abstract category of biographical subjects. Some (e.g., “judges”) corresponded to contemporary professions, while others (e.g., “prophets”) were retrospective. Others again are sometimes retrospective and sometimes descriptive, e.g., “Sufis,” a group whose earliest exemplars did not always designate themselves as such. Conversely, the biographers did not write about every occupational group: no one to my knowledge ever composed biographies of prayer-callers, midwives, or garbage collectors, all of whom may have possessed a sense of communal solidarity similar to that ascribed to members of the more celebrated ṭāʾifas.

Al-Sarrāj identified the members of each of his three Personengruppen as “knowers” and heirs of the prophets. However, not all groups could claim descent from Muhammad or any connection with religious scholarship. Of al-Suyūṭī’s sixteen groups, for example, three (scribes and essayists, calligraphers, and poets) have only a tangential relationship with prophecy, or none at all. Biographers of groups like these nevertheless endeavored to legitimate their subjects’ field of interest. A common tactic was to insist that their work, however far afield, had as its ultimate purpose the clarification of some aspect of the revelation. Yaqūt, for example, describes his literary scholars as experts in Qurʾān and Ḥadīth, even though many of them had nothing to say about either. However, they did know Arabic, knowledge of which “is religion itself.” Another strategy was to expand the definition of knowledge. Interpreted loosely, the Ḥadīth about heirship to the prophets suggests that the possession of any kind of ʿilm qualifies a ṭāʾifā for heirship and a place in biography. Introducing his compilation on physicians, Ibn Abī ʿUṣaybīʿa

67 MU, I:32. He still worried, though: “I do not deny that it would have been worthier for me to have spent my time at the mosque and at my prayers” instead of writing biography (I: 31–32).
declares that “the practice of medicine is among the noblest and most lucrative trades, and is mentioned extensively in Scripture and legal injunctions.” Therefore, “the knowledge (‘ilm) of bodily ailments has become linked with that of religion.” From this follows the necessity of writing about those “whom God has privileged with this knowledge,” pagans and Christians as well as Muslims. 

Like members of a lineage, members of a normative tā‘īfa have their single ancestor: the first person to gain the knowledge or perform the characteristic activity of the group. Moreover, just as each generation of a lineage gives birth to the next, members of a scholarly or occupational tā‘īfa pass their mandate on from one generation of practitioners to the next. Finally, like individuals of common ancestry, members of the tā‘īfa are theoretically interchangeable. All of them know or do the same thing, and their prestige derives from the degree to which they uphold the mandate conferred by the first generation. In his discussion of the exclusivity of biographical dictionaries compiled by the ‘ulamā’, Tarif Khalidi affirms that biographers “made an explicit or implicit appeal to a doctrine of the elite, by whose labors and in whose lives religion subsists and is transmitted from one generation to the next.” Of course, such a vision of the past necessarily resulted in a certain distortion of the historical record. Discussing the manifestations of self-awareness among intellectuals of the fourth/tenth century, Wolfhart Heinrichs notes that scholars used awā‘il-tales and back-projection to “create the impression that the same kind of compartmentalization with which they were faced already obtained a hundred or more years earlier.” In many cases, it was the biographers who lent the early history of their tā‘īfa whatever coherence it later appeared to possess, often by extending its history back into early Islamic times and sometimes even beyond. Typically, biographers used the introductions of their works to present programmatic expositions of the venerability of their tā‘īfa and its indispensability to the community. They also used their subjects as mouthpieces for such expositions, or, more commonly, let their subjects’ words and deeds affirm the tā‘īfa’s claim to authority. The case studies in this and the subsequent chapters will illustrate each of these processes in detail.

Despite its failure to correspond exactly to historical and social reality, the tā‘īfa-model was no biographer’s fancy either. Rather, it corresponded to an important structure of self-presentation and self-perception. At the broadest level, as Roy Mottahedeh has shown with reference to Buyid society, medieval Muslims professed membership in a complex combination of kin groups, patronage institutions, professional associations, regional factions, and racial collectivities. The Buyid polity thus comprised numerous semi-independent and often overlapping social groups (referred to variously as tabaqa, ṣīnif, and jīn) held together by relationships of mutual loyalty among differently privileged members. These networks of loyalty operated at all levels of society,

from the men of the regime down to food sellers, rag dealers, and cobblers.\footnote{Mottahedeh, \textit{Loyalty}, 97–174.} In Buyid society as elsewhere, however, only certain social groups – the literate classes and particularly the scholars – left substantial testimony about their perceptions of themselves and of other groups. These perceptions were strikingly schematic, as is evident from the scholars’ self-classification into categories of specialization. In his study of classical Islamic “humanism” (\textit{adab}), George Makdisi shows how scholars distinguished in practice as well as in theory between practitioners of the religious and the literary sciences, and within each of these broad categories, among numerous sub-fields. Each set of experts claimed exclusive possession of a body of knowledge deemed desirable for others to learn or necessary to the community at large. Although an individual scholar might attain expertise in more than one field (and many did), representatives of the two super-groups, the ‘\textit{ulamā’} (religious scholars) and the \textit{udabā’} (“humanists,” in Makdisi’s translation), often asserted their \textit{differentia} forcefully enough to provoke mutual antagonism.\footnote{Makdisi, \textit{Humanism}, 1–200.}

To this survey of the evolution of classical Arabic biography one development must be added: the compilation of biographical works embracing subjects of different \textit{tā’ifas}. Modern scholarship usually credits Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282) with the first catholic biographical dictionary, but this sets the date about two centuries too late. Arguably, the first move back to comprehensiveness was the compilation of biographical dictionaries that took some criterion other than \textit{tā’ifa}-affiliation as their basis of inclusion. For example, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071) included in his \textit{Ta’rikh Baghdad} anyone of importance who had spent time in the city of Baghdad. The work therefore contains biographies of subjects from a variety of \textit{tā’ifas}, including “caliphs, descendants of the Prophet, dignitaries, judges, legists, \textit{Hādīth}-men, Qur’ān-readers, renunciants, righteous men, littérateurs, and poets.”\footnote{\textit{TB}, I: 227 (= old edn. I: 212–13).} A century later, Ibn ‘Asākir followed the same procedure for Syria in his \textit{Ta’rikh Dimashq}. A century later again, Yāqūt (681/1282) moved toward comprehensiveness in a different way by merging some of the \textit{tā’ifas}. He collected biographies of “grammarians, lexicologists, genealogists, famous Qur’ān readers, chroniclers, historians, well-known stationers and scribes, epistolographers, eponymous calligraphers,” and the like. All these he placed together in a work on a super-\textit{tā’ifa} called \textit{al-udabā’}, “people of culture.”\footnote{\textit{MU}, I: 29.} Only after all this did Ibn Khallikān compose his \textit{Wafayāt al-a’yan}. This work includes prominent Muslims from a wide variety of periods and classes. It organizes the entries alphabetically, a format which “entails mixing up the ancients and the moderns, and mixing up subjects of different categories,”\footnote{Ibn Khallikān, \textit{Wafayāt}, I: 20. On the work, see Fähndrich, “Man and Men.”} as the author says. Similarly broad policies of inclusion eventually resulted in such titanically comprehensive works as the \textit{Siyar a’lām al-nubalā’} of al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) and the \textit{Wāfī bi ‘l-wafayāt} of al-Ṣafādī (d. 764/1362). Both compilers
apparently tried to include every Muslim of importance (according to a

certain definition of importance: the prayer-callers, midwives, and garbage-

genomen did not make it in). In a sense this trend signals a return to the original

impulse of Ibn Sa‘d and his colleagues, who took all important Muslims as

their proper subject. In another sense it anticipates the aspirations to all-inclus-

iveness of such modern works as the Encyclopaedia of Islam.

History and biography

Authors of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries do not oblige us with
discussions of the genre within which their works should be classified. Even
so, many works bear titles suggestive of an interest in life-stories rather than
events. These titles include sīra, “account of conduct,” manāqib “virtues,”
of death-dates,” and most broadly akhbār al-nās, “accounts of notable
persons.” In later periods, we find manāqib and sīra used for single-subject
biography, and ṭabaqāt used for collective biographies arranged in chronologi-
cal order. The term ta‘rīkh, confusingly, refers to annalistic histories as well
as to biographical collections that mention the death-dates of their subjects.
Similarly, the term akhbār applies to works that narrate historical events, but
not by year; and thus also to collections of biographical anecdotes, usually
about a single subject.

Perhaps because of these terminological ambiguities, later compilers often
write as if history, or at least the history that mattered to them, were simply a
collection of biographies. Thus al-Subkı‘s famous guidelines for the histo-
rian (adab al-mu‘arrīkh) are actually instructions for writing biographies
(tarājim). Similarly, al-Ṣafadī’s eulogy of ta‘rīkh is actually a description of
the benefits of reading biography. But these examples are misleading: in theory
and in practice, the historians and critics of the late-classical tradition also
evince a clear awareness of the distinction between the two genres. For al-
Ṣafadī, the distinction arises from their respective arrangement of material:

Mu‘arrīkhūn have customarily organized their works either by year, which is more
appropriate for history (ta‘rīkh) because events and occurrences thus appear in order;
or in alphabetical order, which is more appropriate for biographies (tarājim) because
the entry on a particular person will bring together in one place events that befell him
in various years, either in summary fashion as is more common, or, less usually, in
detail.

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76 In this connection it is noteworthy that the poet Abū ‘l-‘Atāhiya (d. 211/826) describes himself
as reading a copybook (daftar) containing instructive accounts of historical figures (Dīwān,
439: rhyme zāwiya).
77 For examples see Ibn al-Nadīm, Fihrist, 131–67.
78 Gibb, “Islamic Biographical Literature”; Hamad, “History and Biography.”
79 Subkı, Ṭabaqāt, 2: 22–25 (quoting his father ‘Alī b. ‘Abd al-Kāfī); cited in Sakhāwī, Ilān, 132,
80 Ṣafadī, Wāfi, 1: 42; see also Khalidi, Arabic Historical Thought, 56.
This definition implies that the two genres overlap in content, and indeed they often do.\(^81\) For example, even a cursory look at al-Suyūṭī’s biographies of the caliphs reveals that he took much of his material from annalistic histories. Yet he evidently felt it necessary to extract this material and repackage it as biography. In his introduction, he explains why. Chronicles, he says, jumble together individuals from different occupational groups (tawā’if), making it difficult to find out about members of any one group. To provide this information, one must compile their akhbār separately. Al-Suyūṭī emphasizes the distinction by dividing his sources into two types: books on history (al-ḥawādith, “events”) and books on “other material” (ghayru ‘l-hawādith). The first set consists of annalistic histories (e.g., those by al-Dhahābī and Ibn Kathīr). The second set contains biographical compilations (e.g., those by al-Khaṭīb, Ibn ʿAsākir, and Abū Nuʿaym al-Īṣfahānī) as well as a number of adab-works (e.g., al-Mubarrad’s al-Kāmil and Thaʿlab’s al-Amāli). For al-Suyūṭī, then, biography performed a function distinct from that of annalistic history. As a genre, moreover, it fell into the same category as literary and philological writing.

What then were the distinct functions of biography as opposed to annalistic history? A convenient illustration comes from the tāʾīfa of caliphs, who seem inextricably positioned between the two. The narrative histories follow their activities in detail, and even the most laconic annals perforce mention them frequently. At the same time, we find biographical entries devoted to them as individuals, listed either in order of reign, or mixed in with entries on other notables.\(^82\) The caliphs therefore make the ideal test case for any proposal about differences between historical and biographical representation. More broadly, they also pose a challenge to the notion of tāʾīfa-biography. The caliphate is the archetypal instance of heirship to the Prophet, and should lend itself readily to the tāʾīfa model I have outlined. Formally, caliphal biography does conform to the model: one of the earliest extant compilations on caliphs, the Taʾrīkh al-khulāfāʾ of Ibn Yazīd, presents them as placeholders in a list that begins with Mūḥammad.\(^83\) While one of the last ones, al-Suyūṭī’s work of the same title, treats them as a tāʾīfa defined by Qurashī descent and the establishment of de facto power.\(^84\) Even so, caliphal biography differs in one important respect from the other traditions surveyed so far. Those who documented the lives of Ḥadīth-scholars, grammarians, and the like were usually themselves members of the group, or at least advocates of its claim to knowledge. However, Ibn Yazīd, al-Suyūṭī, and all the caliphal biographers in between

\(^81\) See further ‘Abbās’ remarks on the interplay of the two in the work of Ibn Khallikān (Wafayāt, VII: 65–81).

\(^82\) For the titles of early works on caliphs and the caliphate, see Ibn al-Nadīm, Fihrist, 134–63; Abbot, Studies, I: 80ff; Muṣṭafā, Taʾrīkh, I: 122, 132, 162, 164, 210, 214, 220, 221.

\(^83\) Ibn Yazīd (?) = Ibn Māja, d. 273/886–87, Taʾrīkh al-khulāfāʾ.

\(^84\) The work thus covers the Rāshīdūn, the Umayyads, and the Abbasids down to al-Mutawakkil II (d. 903/1497), omitting “those who claimed the caliphate as secessionists and were unsuccessful, e.g., a good many Alids and a few of the Abbasids.” The Fāṭimids he excludes on the grounds that their Qurashī descent was falsified (Suyūṭī, Taʾrīkh, 4ff).
were not themselves caliphs, and only rarely display a programmatic intention to shore up the caliphal claim to authority.

As Noth and Conrad have shown, even the earliest treatments of the caliphs can be divided into two types: historical and biographical. Historical treatments mention the caliph whenever he plays a role in the event being described; but the event, not the caliph, is the focus of the narration. Biographical treatments of the caliphs, on the other hand, deal only with them, and consist of programmatic listings of vital statistics and sometimes anecdotes. A comparable division holds true for later works as well. The histories, like those by al-Ya‘qūbī (d. 284/898) and al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), proceed in chronological order, often year by year. They record the accession and death of each caliph, and record the events of his reign. Frequently, the caliph plays no role in these events and is therefore absent from the narration. The biographical works, on the other hand, consist of entries on individual caliphs, and tend to adduce akhbār in thematic rather than chronological order. Occasionally, historical and biographical presentations do co-exist in a single work. In such cases, however, they appear in separate sections. Al-Ṭabarī’s Ta’rikh, for example, contains an annalistic section for the narration of events and a separate section for caliphal biography (ṣīra).

Looking more closely at the biographical treatment of a single caliph, ‘Abd Allāh al-Ma‘mūn (the subject of chapter 2), we find two works that appear to blur the distinction between annalistic history and akhbār biography. These are the Kitāb Baghdaḍ of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr (d. 280/893) and the Murūj al-dhahab of al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 345/956). By Noth and Conrad’s criteria, nevertheless, both works function as biographies, not histories. In the Kitāb Baghdaḍ, al-Ma‘mūn is at the center of the action. Frequently, he is the protagonist of the anecdotes. When he is not, he is often mentioned or described by others. Even when the text digresses into akhbār about his courtiers, the subjects chosen are precisely those dictated by the progress of the caliph’s career. In the Murūj, similarly, the focus often wanders away from al-Ma‘mūn, but his reign is the unit of organization that frames all the reports in his entry. Moreover, many of the reports are adduced specifically to comment on historical events mentioned only later, or not at all.

To understand how this sort of treatment differs from that of the annalistic histories, it will be useful to make a more specific comparison. As a model for the annalistic treatment, we may take the historical section of al-Ṭabarī’s Ta’rikh, which contains the most detailed and most commonly epitomized account of al-Ma‘mūn’s reign. The text consists of documents as well as narrative reports. The documents include the Mecca protocol, by which the caliph al-Rashīd divided the rule between his sons al-Amīn and al-Ma‘mūn. They

86 TRM, VI: 527–650 (annals of al-Ma‘mūn’s reign; related material appears in the preceding section on al-Amīn), 650–51 (summary sīra), 651–66 (anecdotal sīra); tr. in Tabari, War and Reunification.
also include the correspondence exchanged between the half-brothers as their relationship deteriorated, and the letters by which al-Ma’mūn commanded assent to the doctrine of the created Qur’ān. The narrative reports include an account of the civil war between al-Amīn and al-Ma’mūn; brief notes on the designation and subsequent death of al-Ma’mūn’s Alid heir apparent, ʿAlī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā; and a blow-by-blow account of the factional strife in Baghdad before al-Ma’mūn’s resumption of authority there. Other reports mention official appointments and provincial insurrections. A particularly long sequence describes the interrogations carried out to determine the allegiance of the scholars to the doctrine of the created Qur’ān. The listing of events for the year 218/833 ends with a report on the caliph’s death, followed by the separate sīra or biographical section.

Instructive as it may be in some respects, particularly in its citation of documents, the annalistic part of al-Ṭabarī’s account is neither a complete biography nor even a complete history. It tells us almost nothing of al-Ma’mūn’s life before he became caliph. He appears briefly when he is named as one of his father’s heirs, and again only when the civil war breaks out. Even when it treats his years in power, the annalistic account confines itself to the outward course of events. It is preoccupied with dissention, conflict, and war, and gives the impression that al-Ma’mūn’s reign, like the reigns of the other caliphs, consisted of one armed struggle after another. Moreover, it eschews commentary, discussion, and presentation of evidence for or against any explicit interpretation of al-Ma’mūn’s behavior. Admittedly the text includes such documents as Tāhir’s famous “mirror for princes” and the caliph’s Inquisition-letters. But we learn almost nothing about the intellectual and literary preoccupations that prompted the composition of these documents. Nor is there any mention of developments in the religious and secular sciences, of art and architecture, or social and religious movements, except when their representatives resort to violence.

The biographical sources, including al-Ṭabarī’s own sīra-section, provide a very different picture of al-Ma’mūn’s reign. For present purposes, however, the best example comes not from al-Ṭabarī but rather from al-Masʿūdī’s Murūj. One day, the caliph al-Qāhir (r. 320–22/932–34) summoned Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-ʿAbdī, an akhbārī who possessed expert knowledge of the “characters and dispositions” (akhlāq wa-shiyam) of the Abbasid caliphs. Brandishing a lance, al-Qāhir demanded to hear about his predecessors: “Don’t hide anything from me,” he ordered, “and don’t improve the story, or make it rhyme; and don’t leave anything out!” Al-ʿAbdī agreed to speak only after receiving a promise that the caliph would not harm him. He then related brief biographies of the Abbasids from al-Saffāḥ to al-Mutawakkil. The report on al-Ma’mūn runs as follows:

87 The only explicit assessment I find concerns the civil war: al-Ṭabarī says that removing al-Ma’mūn from the succession “was not something al-Amīn thought of or resolved to do; in fact, he had intended to be faithful to the agreement and to his brother” (VIII: 374).
88 MDh, IV: 313–14.
At the beginning of his reign, when he was under the sway of al-Faḍl b. Sahl and others, he made use of astrological predictions and felt compelled to heed their dictates. Following the practice of the ancient Sasanian monarchs such as Ardashīr b. Bābak, he devoted himself to the reading and intense study of ancient books, and attained expertise in understanding them. But when you-know-what happened to al-Faḍl b. Sahl and al-Maʾmūn came to Iraq, he dropped all that and adopted the doctrines of divine transcendence and human free will. He held sessions with theologians and cultivated experts in disputation and speculation, including Abū al-Hudhayl and Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. Sayyār al-Nazzām. Some of them he agreed with, and others not. He also made a practice of meeting with religious and literary scholars, whom he brought in from provincial cities and supported by regular stipends. Thus he stimulated interest in speculative reasoning. People learned how to discuss and dispute, and each faction wrote books defending its point of view. He was the most clement, forbearing, able, generous, and freespending of men, and the farthest from frivolity. His viziers and courtiers emulated him and imitated his conduct.89

This report illustrates three distinctive functions of biographical as opposed to historical discourse. First, al-ʿAbdī assumes al-Qāhir’s familiarity with the events of history: hence the reference to the “you-know what” that happened to the vizier, al-Faḍl (meaning his assassination in Sarakhs).90 This presumption of knowledge on the reader’s part is typical of biography, whether of caliphs or anyone else. Of course, not all biographical anecdotes require familiarity with the historical context. Witticisms and citations of poetry, in particular, often require only minimal knowledge of the persons involved, and no knowledge of specific historical events. Moreover, when a historical fact is particularly important, a biographer or his source will supply a summary account of the event in question.91 In general, however, biography tends to assume a knowledge of context, and this knowledge tends to be identical to the content of annalistic history.

Second, biography, operating as it does on the margins of history, serves as a repository for expressions of opinion.92 Al-ʿAbdī’s report includes an assessment of al-Maʾmūn’s character, a history of his intellectual development, and a characterization of philosophical activity during his reign. Such judgements are the special province of biography, which can offer them without worrying about the year in which they should be placed. As we have noted, the biographers of caliphs were not themselves caliphs. Indeed, they were often members of ṭāʿifas whose claim to authority contradicted or competed with that of the caliphs. When writing annalistic history, a Ḥadīth-scholar like al-Ṭabarī could include materials that suggest disapproval of a particular policy or a particu-

89 Ibid., IV: 318–19; also Gutas, Greek Thought, 77ff.
90 Similarly, the remark about astrological predictions may be an allusion to al-Maʾmūn’s nomination of an Alid heir in expectation of the apocalyptic end of the Abbasid dynasty (as suggested in Madelung, “New Documents”). That al-Maʾmūn sought signs in the heavens is confirmed by the “Risālat al-khamīs” (Ṣafwat, Jamhara, 3: 379; Arazi and Elʿad, “Épître,” 67: 49).
91 See, e.g., TRM, VIII: 665–66.
92 I am indebted here to Wallace-Hadrill, who argues that the Roman biographer Suetonius set out to supplement, not replace, the historical account of Tacitus (Suetonius, 8–22).
lar dynast. Yet this judgement remains implicit. In biography, on the other hand, the caliph’s critics could praise and condemn him, seek explanations or excuses for his behavior, and even take a position on the legitimacy of his dynastic claims. A similar propensity for interpretation is evident in the biographies of lesser figures as well. Indeed, it is often only by consulting the biographies of the persons named in the annals that the modern reader can discern the texture of lived experience that lay behind the events the historians recount with such dispassionate concision.

Finally, al-Mas‘ūdī’s report suggests that biographical narratives derived their authority from appearing to be anecdotes in the literal sense, that is, undisseminated reports (from the Greek *anekdoton*, “not given out”). Al-Qāhir assumes that al-‘Abdī is aware of family secrets that he has prudently kept hidden, even from those most entitled to hear them. He also suspects that al-‘Abdī will rhyme, leave things out, and otherwise alter the story to suit his audience. To force him to speak, the caliph must threaten to punish him for silence in the same way that he would punish him for slander. For his part, al-‘Abdī must persuade al-Qāhir of the accuracy of his account, which he does by reporting scandals. As he appears to have understood, only when al-Qāhir hears unpleasant things about his predecessors will he believe that he is hearing the real story. By reporting secrets, biography assumes an air of veracity.93 In fact, the “secrets” al-‘Abdī relates were hardly secret: they appear in al-Mas‘ūdī’s *Murūj*. Even so, al-‘Abdī’s report commands interest, and exudes authority, because it offers (or purports to offer) insights into “character and disposition” that were missing from annalistic history.