Pre-modern Arabic biography has served as a major source for the history of Islamic civilization. In the first book-length study in English to explore the origins and development of classical Arabic biography, Michael Cooperson demonstrates how Muslim scholars used the notions of heirship and transmission to document the activities of political, scholarly, and religious communities. The author also explains how medieval Arab writers used biography to tell the life-stories of important historical figures by examining the careers of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mūn, the Shiite Imam ‘All al-Ridā, the Sunni scholar Ahmad Ibn Ḥanbal, and the ascetic Bishr al-Ḥāfī. Each of these figures represented a tradition of political and spiritual heirship to the Prophet Muhammad and each, moreover, knew at least one of the others, regarding him as a rival or an ally. The study reconstructs the career of each figure from his own biographies, as well as from the biographies of the others. Drawing on anthropology and comparative religion, as well as history and literary criticism, the book offers an account of how each figure responded to the presence of the others and how these responses were preserved or rewritten by posterity.

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Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization

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

MICHAEL COOPERSON
University of California, Los Angeles
Dedicated to my parents,
and to the memory of my grandparents
The reader familiar with tales of people now dead, with the feats of those plunged into the cavern of extinction never to emerge, with the lore of those who scaled the heights of power, and with the virtues of those whom Providence delivered from the stranglehold of adversity, feels that he has known such men in their own time. He seems to join them on their pillowed thrones and lean companionably with them on their cushioned couches. He gazes at their faces – some framed in hoods, others lambent under helmets – seeing in the evil ones the demonic spark, and in the good ones that virtue which places them in the company of angels. He seems to share with them the best pressings of aged wine in an age where time no longer presses, and to behold them as in their battles they breathe the sweet scent of swordplay in the shadows of tall and bloodstained lances. It is as if all that company were of his own age and time; as if those who grieve him were his enemies, and those who give him pleasure, his friends. But they have ridden in the vanguard long before him, while he walks in the rear-guard far behind.

al-Šafadî, Wāfi, I: 4

Men by mere principles of nature are capable of being affected with things that have a special relation to religion as well as other things. A person by mere nature, for instance, may be liable to be affected with the story of Jesus Christ, and the sufferings he underwent, as well as by any other tragical story: he may be the more affected with it from the interest he conceives mankind to have in it; yea, he may be affected with it without believing in it; as well as a man may be affected with what he reads in a romance, or sees acted in a stage play. He may be affected with a lively and eloquent description of many pleasant things that attend the state of the blessed in heaven, as well as his imagination be entertained by a romantic description of the pleasantness of fairy land, or the like . . . A person therefore may have affecting views of the things of religion, and yet be very destitute of spiritual light. Flesh and blood may be the author of this: one man may give another an affecting view of divine things with but common assistance: but God alone can give a spiritual discovery of them.

Jonathan Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” Selected Writings (1734), 71
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Preface

If poetry is the “archive of the Arabs,” biography is the archive of the Muslims. Premodern Arabic literature contains biographies of hundreds of thousands of Muslims (and occasionally non-Muslims) from soldiers and scholars to lovers and lunatics. With this diversity of subjects comes a variety of forms, ranging from simple lists of names to elaborately detailed narratives. In a few cases, above all that of the Prophet Muhammad, biographers strove for exhaustive coverage of a subject’s life from birth to death. More commonly, they collected the names of all the notable men, and sometimes the notable women, who had lived in a certain town, practiced a single profession, or died in a particular century. The entries in such collections are often very short. However, the collections themselves are so large that historians have been able to mine them for information about kinship, marriage, political alliances, labor, social status, and the transmission of knowledge in premodern Muslim communities. Scholars of Arabic literature, for their part, have preferred to deal with single entries that contain descriptions, anecdotes, and lines of poetry. They have analyzed compilers’ use of sources, traced changes in the representation of a single subject over time, and brought to light biographers’ notions of plotting, characterization, and moral thematics.

Given the genre’s diversity of form, one may wonder whether the term biography properly applies to it at all. Admittedly, it is awkward to refer to a list of names as a work of biography. Yet it is equally awkward to impose a firm distinction between the bare list and an annotated one, or between the annotated list and one where the notes have grown into anecdotes. Moreover, the tradition itself regarded all such works as related. In their discussions of

2 E.g., Cohen, “Economic Background”; Bulliet, Patricians; Crone, Slaves; Shatzmiller, Labour; Melchert, Formation; and further Humphreys, Islamic History, 187–92.
3 E.g., the work of Fāhndrich and Leder; also Malis-Douglas, “Controversy”; Rāgib, “Al-Sayyida Nafisa”; van Ess, “Ibn al-Rwandi”; Eisener, Faktum und Fiktion; Homerin, Arab Poet; Spellberg, Politics.
history and historiography, late-classical scholars described biography as a
genre whose minimal topical and structural element is the individual human
subject. In practice, the genre was indeed distinct from annalistic history and
performed specific duties with respect to it. On this point the biographers are
less forthcoming, but a close study of their works reveals a distinctive
approach to the problem of historical inquiry.

As is evident from the popularity of works devoted to groups of people,
Arabic biographers did not see their task as consisting primarily in the com-
memoration of individual lives. Rather, they used life-stories to document and
perpetuate traditions of authority based on knowledge borne and transmit-
ted, or merely claimed, by groups (tawā'if, sing. tā'ifa) of specialized practi-
tioners. By recording the activities of single members, biographers sought to
demonstrate the legitimacy of the group’s chosen enterprise as well as the
place of individual subjects within the tradition. In seeking to account for
both the documentary and belletristic aspects of the genre, this book hopes to
show (among other things) that its “literary effects” arose in response to the
need to negotiate crises in the history of the groups whose collective life the
biographers had undertaken to record.

Of all the traditions of knowledge contested by the tā’ifas, none was more
hotly disputed than the legacy of the Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad
reportedly said: “The bearers of knowledge are the heirs of the prophets.”
The political and religious history of premodern Muslim societies was often
evoked by participants and observers as a struggle among claimants to this
legacy of knowledge, and much scholarly attention was devoted to sorting out
the claims. To illustrate how biographers applied this schematic notion of
social order to the rough-and-tumble negotiation of that order in history, I
have chosen four figures of the third/ninth century and surveyed the textual
record of their lives. Each of these figures – the Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mūn,
the Shi‘ite Imam ‘Alī al-Riḍā, the Sunni scholar Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, and the
ascetic Bishr al-Ḥāfiṣ – claimed heirship to Muhammad, or was declared to
have done so by his biographers. Moreover, their respective claims ranged
from the complementary to the flatly contradictory. Most helpfully for our
purposes, each of the four also had significant contact with at least one of the
others. As a result, their respective biographers had to address the claims made
by representatives of rival tā’ifas. The collective textual afterlife of these four
men thus permits a contrastive examination of the ways in which their biog-
raphers dealt with competing claims to authority.

The period during which our four subjects flourished, the first half of the
third/ninth century, is fraught with dramatic events. These include the strug-
bble between al-Ma’mūn and his relatives for control of the caliphate, the des-
ignation of ‘Alī al-Riḍā as heir apparent, and the Abbasid Inquisition. These
events, whose spectacular character made them prominent episodes in the

4 Safadī, Wādiff, I: 42; Su‘yūfī, Ta‘rīkh al-khulafa‘rā, 4; Khalidi, Arabic Historical Thought, 56.
biographies of those involved, are also symptomatic of broader trends. Al-Ma’mūn appears to have been testing ambitious notions of caliphal authority. The failure of both his major initiatives – the designation of al-Riḍā as heir apparent, and the Inquisition – set the stage for the eventual compromise with Sunnism. Sunnism itself first takes on a distinct political and doctrinal identity during this period. It appears first as a set of practices and opinions attributed to pietists like Ibn Hanbal, and emerges as the officially sanctioned ideology of the Abbasid caliphate. Shi‘ism, too, was still in its formative period: though its major doctrines had already crystallized, its subsequent understanding of the Imam’s role in history drew upon the experiences of the third-century Imams, including al-Riḍā. Meanwhile, asceticism, at first often congruent (in Baghdad, at any rate) with proto-Sunnism, emerges as a distinct style of piety, laying the groundwork for the appearance of a new mystical tradition, Sufism. A study of the representatives of four leading traditions of heirship to the Prophet permits a synoptic vision of the conflicts and compromises that shaped later belief and practice. It also brings into relief the work of biographers, whose accounts of their respective heroes contain the bulk of the information we are ever likely to obtain about this formative period of Islamic civilization.
Acknowledgements

It is a pleasure to thank the many friends and colleagues who have contributed to this work. Wollhart Heinrichs, my Doktorvater, and Roy Mottahedeh ably supervised the early research from which this book has grown. Ahmad Mahdavi Damghani inspired my study of Shiite literature, and Everett Rowson offered an astute critique of chapter 3. Michael Cook, Tayeb El-Hibri, Christopher Melchert, Claudia Rapp, and A. Kevin Reinhart read a preliminary study on Ibn Hanbal and Bishr al-Hafi, and generously responded with corrections, comments, and references. Marigold Acland of Cambridge University Press made the editorial process a pleasure. The careful comments of the Press’s readers, who alas must remain anonymous, proved of inestimable help.

My colleagues and I owe an all-too-frequently unacknowledged debt of gratitude to the editors and publishers of classical Arabic texts in the Arab countries, Iran, India, Europe, and elsewhere. Only their prodigious and often unremunerative labors keep the tradition alive and make the critical study of it possible. I am also indebted to the Arabic librarians, past and present, of Harvard’s Widener Library; and to David Hirsch, Middle East bibliographer at the University of California, Los Angeles, without whose expert assistance this work could never have been completed.

Russo, Leyla Rouhi, Yona Sabar, David Schaberg, William Schniedewind, Stuart Semmel, Rebecca Spang, Devin Stewart, Stephanie Thomas, Shawkat Toorawa, Avram Udovitch, Leif Wenar, and Yâsîr al-Zayyât. I also thank my students at UCLA for their encouragement, and Melissa Brooner for leaving the light on.

Although my teachers, colleagues, and friends deserve most of the credit for the existence of this book, none is responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation it may contain. I do hope, however, that they will feel responsible for drawing any such errors to my attention.
Abbreviations


HA Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Hilyat al-awliyā’*

KB Ibn Abī ‘Ṭahir Tayfūt, *Kitāb Baghdād*

ManIH Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib al-imām Ahmad Ibn Hanbal*

MDh al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*

MU Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-udābā’*

SAN al-Dhahabī, *Ṣiyar aš-šām al-nubalā’*

TB al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*

TH Ibn Abī Ya’lā al-Farrā’, *Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila*

ThG Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*

TMD Ibn ‘Asākir, *Ta’rīkh maḏānīt Dinashq*

TRM al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa l-mulūk*

UAR Ibn Bābawayh, *‘Uyun akhbār al-Riḍā*
Note on transliteration

This book follows the Library of Congress transliteration system for Arabic, but without indicating final tāʾ marbuta or distinguishing between alif maqṣūra and alif maqṣūra. In connected discourse, the hamzat al-wasūl is indicated by an apostrophe. Technical terms and place names used in English appear without transliteration (e.g., Shiite, Baghdad), as do Anglicized derivatives of Arabic words (e.g., Alid).
Note on dating systems

Dates are given according to the Hijri calendar and then according to the Gregorian (e.g., 230/845). When only the Hijri dating is certain, the corresponding range of anno domini years is indicated (e.g., 230/845–46).
Glossary

This list covers terms used without explanation after their first appearance. Arabic expressions not included in the glossary are glossed in the text.

abdâl: see badal.

abnāʾ (sing. banawī); also abnāʾ al-dawla and abnāʾ al-daʾwa: originally, the Khurasani supporters of the Abbasid revolution; later, their descendants resident in Baghdad, whether soldiers or civilians.

adab (pl. ādāb): the cultivation of the literary and linguistic sciences.

ahl al-hadīth: students and teachers of Ḥadīth (q.v.), often synonymous with ahl al-sunnah (q.v.).

ahl al-sunnah (wa ‘l-jamāʿa): in the third/ninth century, a sect that stressed the importance of the sunna (q.v.), cultivated the Ḥadīth (q.v.), and rejected Imami Shiism and the khalq al-Qurʾān (qq.v.).

akhbār (sing. khabar): historical information, often conveyed in a narrative.

akhbārī: a collector of akhbār (q.v.).

‘ālim: see ‘ulamāʾ.

al-amr bi ‘l-ma'ruf wa 'l-nahy 'an al-munkar: “enjoining good and forbidding evil” (Qurʾān 3: 104, etc.); an ideal of conduct invoked by the ahl al-sunnah (q.v.).

‘āmma: the common people; among Shiites, a non-Shiite.

awliyāʾ: see wālī.

‘ayyār (pl. ‘ayyārin): a hooligan or gangster; an irregular mercenary.

badal (pl. abdāl or budalāʾ): one of a limited number of holy men gifted with special powers of intercession.

baraka: the power to confer blessing.

budalāʾ: see badal.

daʾwa: a call to allegiance, specifically (1) the summoning of support for the so-called Abbasid revolution of 132/749; and (2) the summoning of support for al-Maʾmūn’s rebellion against al-Amīn.
faqīḥ (pl. fuqahāʾ): one capable of fiqh (q.v.).
fatā (pl. fityān): a young man possessing authority based on physical strength or endurance; a member of a criminal fraternity (often synonymous with ʿayyār [q.v.]).
fiqh: interpretive skill; the ability to discern the right course of action in ritual and legal matters; formal text-based jurisprudence.
ghayba: speaking ill of a fellow Muslim; backbiting, slander.
ghulāḥ: among Shiites, a derogatory term for those who ascribed supernatural powers, notably immortality, to the Imam (q.v.).
ghulāwī: the doctrine of the ghulāḥ (q.v.).
Hādīth: an authenticated report of the Prophet’s words or actions; the corpus of such reports (cf. sunna).
ʿilm: knowledge, often knowledge of Hādīth (q.v.) specifically.
imam, Imam, imām al-hudā: one who in his capacity as a Muslim leads other Muslims, whether in group prayer or as a head of state. Among Sunnis, it is used as a title for exemplary scholars (e.g., Ibn Hānbal); this meaning is rendered here as “imam.” Among Twelver Shiites, it refers to one of twelve destined leaders of the Muslim community; this meaning is rendered here with capitalization (“Imam”). The caliph al-Maʾmūn (among others) referred to himself as imām al-hudā or “rightly guided and rightly guiding leader”; this title will be given in transliteration.
imāmat al-hudā: the office of the imām al-hudā (q.v.).
Imamism: the branch of Shiism (q.v.) from which Twelver Shiism (q.v.) emerged.
isnād: a list of the persons who have transmitted a report from one generation to the next.
kalām: a discourse on religion that employs syllogistic reasoning; theology; dogmatic speculation.
khilq al-Qurʾān: the belief that the Qurʾān was created by God, as opposed to being co-eternal with Him.
madīnah (pl. madīnahs): a school of fiqh (q.v.); a community of affiliated scholars.
maghaẓāt: the military campaigns undertaken during the Prophet’s lifetime; a work describing these campaigns; a common designation for early biographies of the Prophet.
muʾrifā: mystical knowledge, as opposed to ʿilm (q.v.).
miḥna: a “trial” or “test”; specifically, the Inquisition put into effect by the caliph al-Maʾmūn.
mushabbihā: “anthropomorphists” (cf. tashbīḥ); a derogatory term for literalist Ḥadīth-scholars.

ra'y: “judgement” or “opinion”; a type of fiqh (q.v.) that could take place without reference to Ḥadīth (q.v.).

riʾāza: the office or attribute of leadership; the attainment of a popular following.

ridā, al-: an acceptable leader of the community; the title of the eighth Imam of the Twelver Shiites (and thus capitalized: “al-Ridā”).

rijāl: literally “men”; the term for a sub-genre of biography that examines the reliability of transmitters of Ḥadīth (q.v.).

Shiism: the belief that the office of Imam (q.v.) may be held only by a descendant of ʿAlī b. Abī Tālib.

ṣīra: literally “conduct”; a common title of biographical works, especially those dealing with the Prophet.

sunna: the exemplary practice of the early Muslim community; (pl. sunan) a report of this practice. Unlike a Ḥadīth (q.v.), a sunna in the latter sense can report the practice of any exemplary early Muslim.

Sunni, proto-Sunni: associated with the ahl al-sunna wa ʾl-jamāʿa (q.v), either in its formative period (“proto-Sunni”) or in its later manifestations (“Sunni”; cf. Sunnism).

Sunnism: the mature articulation of the creed of the ahl al-sunna (q.v.), characterized by solidarity with the historical caliphate and communal organization by madhhab (see madhhab).

tābaqa (pl. tābaqaṭ): A generation; a group of persons comparable in some way. Commonly used as a title of biographical works.

tāʾīfa: a group of persons possessing the same expertise, holding the same office, or otherwise engaged in a common and characteristic activity.

taʾrīkh: a biographical work that provides the death-dates of its subjects; a historical work organized by year; history as a field of inquiry.

tashbīḥ: the assertion of a similarity between God and created things; anthropomorphism.

Twelver Shiism: the branch of Shiism (q.v.) that holds that the succession of Imams ended with the twelfth.

ʿulamāʾ (sg. ʿālim): literally “those who know”; a common term for scholars, especially scholars of Ḥadīth (q.v.).

walī (pl. awliyāʾ): literally, a friend or affiliate of God; a person credited with extraordinary piety and spiritual power.

waqf: among Imami Shiites, the belief that a particular Imam is the last of the line.
xxii  Glossary

wa¯qifa: a group of Shiites professing waqīf (q.v.).
warā‘: scrupulosity; the strict avoidance of the forbidden and the suspect, as gauged by the sunna (q.v.).
zāhid: a renunciant; an ascetic.
zuhd: renunciation of the world; self-denial; asceticism.