

CHAPTER 1

The birth of a tradition

For historians, literary traditions are the most complex of subjects. They do not possess the familiar contours of events. They do not lend themselves easily to classification as to their beginning, middle or end. When speaking of them, historians often use metaphors of transparency like ‘atmospheres’ or ‘climates’. How they come into existence and how they relate to their environment are notoriously difficult problems. The normal tools of the historical trade, all the way from a dictionary to a pair of strong boots, do not seem to work so well when traditions are investigated. Traditions are untidy and the elements that enter into their make-up themselves belong to the debris of earlier traditions. Unlike an event, a tradition is not ‘born’ but emanates by slow stages from a cultural background. In the case of historical writing, the most relevant part of an environment is frequently an axial text, e.g. Homer for Greek, the Bible for Christian and the Qur’an for Islamic historiography. But these axial texts which inspire and control traditions are in their turn products of a particular consciousness, a particular way of viewing and representing the past.

The tradition of Islamic historical writing emerged from the environment of *jahili* (‘lawless’ or ‘savage’) Arabia. This epithet was given to the pre-Islamic period by the Qur’an. It is in itself an important historical judgement on Arabia’s past and will be considered in its proper place. However, some two to three centuries before the coming of Islam (c. third to sixth centuries AD) *jahili* Arabia had achieved linguistic unity, an impressive and lasting legacy. This unity coincided with the emergence, after centuries of southern domination, of the North as Arabia’s centre of political, economic and religious gravity. The North was an arc of commercial and religious towns joining north-western to north-eastern Arabia and curving through southern Syria and southern Iraq. It was in this arc that the North Arabic script and dialect developed and then dominated the Peninsula. This was in effect a reformulation of a very ancient language with deep affinities to the languages of the ancient Near East. The entire Peninsula was turning its face northwards while the civilization of the South became a distant, dimly perceived memory and cherished most of

2 The birth of a tradition

all by tribes claiming southern descent. The South, *Arabia Felix*, well known to the classical world of Greece and Rome, was being superseded in pre-eminence by a northern *Arabia Ferox*, which was to develop its own traditions in a new cultural zone. The devastation of the imperial wars of the Near East reverberated throughout the Peninsula, especially during the sixth century. Cities of the northern arc like Mecca, Yathrib (later Medina) and Hira and regions like Bahrayn and Yamama in the north east benefited commercially from nearby wars, while an intensification of missionary activity by Christianity and Judaism first brought turmoil to the moribund South and then began to disturb the traditional modes of thought and life throughout the Peninsula.

But the new *Arabia Ferox* of the northern arc was an altogether more turbulent, more militant and tribal region than the South had been. The gap between nomadism and settled life was narrow and easily bridgeable. The towns were relatively new and fragile foundations with few urban institutions and populations that probably did not exceed 10–15,000 inhabitants. Powerful nomadic and semi-nomadic tribal confederacies controlled the major trade routes and had to be appeased or subdued by ambitious towns. The tribes, nomadic or settled, were fiercely independent entities claiming the total allegiance of individual members. The towns were not only emporia of trade but often claimed for their territory a sanctity in the name of a local idol. *Arabia Ferox* was a region whose cultural traditions were largely of local inspiration. In this kind of environment great honour was paid to the arts of war. Eloquence, on the other hand, was a gift of the gods, a cause of wonder and dread.

It was in poetry that this eloquence was most typically manifested. From the last three centuries before Islam a substantial corpus of poetry has survived containing a genuine core as well as forgeries dating from early Islamic times. Later Muslim scholars called this poetry the *diwan* of the Arabs, the register of their achievements, their heritage. This is what Ya'qubi (d. c. 284/897), the first historian of world culture in Islam, says about *jahili* poetry:

For the Arabs, poetry took the place of philosophy and most of the sciences. If a tribe produced a skilful poet with striking imagery and the right choice of words, they would bring him to the annual markets and the seasons of pilgrimage. The tribes and clans would gather around listening to his poetry. For the tribe concerned, this was regarded as cause for pride and self-esteem. In fact, the Arabs had nothing to refer to for their opinions or actions except poetry. It was with poetry that they fought; it was poetry they quoted; in it they vied in virtue, through it they exchanged oaths and with it they exerted themselves against each other; in it they were praised or blamed.¹

¹ Ya'qubi, *Tarikh*, 1:262. There is an important discussion of *jahili* culture as seen in the Byzantine sources in Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984), pp. 418–62; see especially pp. 444 ff. for the earliest

Jahili poetry, often embedded in stories relating to the lives of the poets, was collated and provided with commentaries in literary anthologies of the 3rd–4th/9th–10th centuries. For the student of the Islamic view of history, this poetic corpus is of tantalizing interest. There is no history here in any formal sense of the term. Nonetheless, the past is recreated or evoked in a manner which the Qur'an was later to brand as *jahili*, even while it shared with this poetry certain terms to describe and situate that past. This poetry speaks to us in many moods: epic or lyrical, tragic, ironic or nostalgic. Where the past is concerned, two terms, *Dahr* ('Time') and *al-Manaya* ('the Dooms') are especially relevant to historical sensibility:

They defeated us but one day, without escape
The *Dahr* will overturn this, ever-changing.

They cared not what *Dahr* would bring thereafter
Nor what evil things catch men unawares.

I saw the *Manaya* strike blindly, whom they hit
They slay, whom they miss lives on to weak old age.
He who dreads the ropes of *Manaya*, they snare him
Even were he to ascend the ropes of heaven on a ladder.
And he who does not defend his fort with his weapons
His fort will be destroyed; and he who does not oppress
Will himself be oppressed.

But when the arrows of the *Manaya* are aimed at a man
Neither medicine nor magic avails him.²

The *Dahr*, endless, ever-changing Time, brings both good and bad fortune to men. It is an abstract, faceless power against which there is no appeal. To each man the *Dahr* allots a fate, but this fate remains forever obscure:

I know what today brings and, before it, yesterday
But I am blind in my knowledge of tomorrow.³

One instrument of *Dahr* is the *Manaya*. Like the *Moirai* of ancient Greece, the *Manaya* are feminine plural, armed with arrows or ropes and lying in wait to trap or strike down the unwary. Railing against them is a legitimate, indeed laudable gesture of manliness but fruitless all the same. Where future time is unknowable, past time holds no moral lessons. Only the vivid present is significant: the pleasures and glories of life and nature to which so much *jahili* poetry is devoted:

references to *jahili* 'odes'. On the rise of historiographic traditions in general, see the stimulating remarks of Paul Veyne, *Writing History* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), chapter 5.

² M. A. Jad al-Mawla *et al.*, *Ayyam al-'Arab fi'l Jahiliyya* (Cairo, 1942), pp. 164, 227, 276, 317.

³ *Ayyam al-'Arab*, p. 276.

4 The birth of a tradition

Roast flesh, the glow of fiery wine
 to speed on camel fleet and sure
 As thy soul lists to urge her on
 through all the hollow's breadth and length;
 White women statue-like that trail
 rich robes of price with golden hem,
 Wealth, easy lot, no dread of ill
 to hear the lute's complaining string –
 These are Life's joys. For man is set
 the prey of Time, and Time is change.⁴

A past recollected in grief and a future anticipated with dread is a common symmetry in *jahili* poetry. Youth is always recalled in sorrow: this is the judgement of the early Islamic grammarian Abu 'Amr ibn al-'Ala' (d. c. 154/770): 'The Arabs mourned nothing so much as youth – and they did not do it justice!'⁵ Thus, in an environment without code of law or ethical system, *jahili* poetry supplied much of the wisdom and the practical moral standards handed down from one generation to the next. The function of history was often served by the model lives of the poets themselves: the wandering prince in search of his kingdom, the low-born rebel defying his tribe, the noble warrior preferring death to dishonour, the stern avenger of murdered kinsmen, the old sage reflecting on a turbulent life, the brigand, the libertine, the unwavering friend and so forth. Where the poet glorifies his tribe rather than himself his boasting verses are frequently an explicit or veiled reminder to his enemies of the historical prowess of the tribe, a recounting of its battle-days of glory expressed not so much in all their Homeric details but in allusions to victories presumed to be well-known to the audience. Strewn among the verses are lines of proverbial wisdom meant to drive home the moral of the poem: the unforeseen change from prosperity to wretchedness, the fleeting character of life and friendships, the exhilaration of love and wine, pride in lordly generosity or even-handed revenge. In *jahili* poetry, narration defers to moralizing, an attitude not without relevance to the later Qur'anic conception of history.

But the influence exerted by *jahili* poetry was not solely confined to the way in which the past was recollected or expressed. In structure and manner of transmission also, *jahili* poetry was to exercise an important influence on the earliest modes of Islamic historical writing. A typical *jahili* ode (*qasida*) was structurally a collection of single lines, each being of two hemistichs and constituting an autonomous unit within a larger whole, more or less coherent in theme or mood. The first hemistich, the *sadr* of a line, was completed by the second, the '*ajuz*. The similarity between

⁴ C. J. Lyall, *Translations of Ancient Arabian Poetry* (London, 1930), p. 64.

⁵ Ibn Qutayba, *Uyun al-Akhbar*, 4:50.

the individual line of verse and the individual report (*khobar*) of early historiography as well as the analogy between the *sadr/ajuz* of each line and the *isnad/matr* (transmission chain/substance) of each report is significant when one is examining early historiographic forms.⁶ Where transmission is concerned, the early poets usually had their own transmitters (*rawiya*) who acted as the guarantors of the authenticity of the poetry. In this area too the poem with its *rawiya* is similar to the historical report with its transmitter. The *jahili rawiya* is in reality the ancestor of the Muslim historian. Later Muslim literature was to spin out the lives of some of these *rawiyas* and story tellers (*qussas*) into hundreds of years, as if to bridge the gap between the cradle of the culture and its vigorous youth, the *jahili rawiya* and the Islamic *khobar*.

In addition to poetry, there was the well-known Arabian tribal preoccupation with genealogy (*nasab*) which was to flourish as an independent science especially in Arab Islam. Where the tribe was the basic social and political unit, genealogy was essential to the determination of individual or collective status. Which tribe is related to which was for centuries before and after Islam the very fabric of political life. Paraphrasing Aristotle, one might say that an Arabian without *nasab* was either above humanity or below it. Although the Qur'an and the preaching of Muhammad called for the strict equality of the believers and certain prophetic sayings restricting inquiry into genealogies gained wide currency, *nasab* was too deeply ingrained not only in a certain way of life but also in a certain delineation of reality. Abu Bakr, we are told, was the Prophet's genealogist, advising him on the structure of tribal alliances. We may infer that Abu Bakr was in this respect simply a representative of a long line of *jahili* genealogists who believed that their heroic traditions preserved the memory of real heroes and actual events. These genealogies were sometimes incompatible especially when they sprang from different parts of Arabia and detailed the *nasab* of various eponymous founders of tribes, clans or dynasties. The 'correction' of confusion in these genealogies was to be one of the primary tasks of early-Islamic genealogy. Nevertheless, genealogy betrayed a consciousness of common origins among the tribes of the Peninsula as well as an attempt to link these origins to those of nearby nations.

Strictly speaking, however, prose is the normal vehicle of history. When we come to pre-Islamic prose, the problems we face are intricate and very old. Here, once again, is the opinion of Abu 'Amr ibn al-'Ala':

What has come down to you from the sayings of the Arabs is only the smallest portion. Had it survived in bulk, much knowledge and poetry would have reached you.⁷

⁶ Josef Horowitz, 'The Earliest Biographies of the Prophet and Their Authors', *Islamic Culture*, 2 (1928), p. 24, note 3. This is a subject which deserves further investigation.

⁷ Ibn al-Anbari, *Nuzhat al-Alibba'*, p. 17.

6 The birth of a tradition

Or the more explicit view of ‘Abd al-Samad ibn al-Fadl al-Raqashi, a poet of the mid-second/eighth century:

The Arabs produced more good prose than good verse. But hardly a tenth of the prose has been preserved and hardly a tenth of the verse has been lost.⁸

In other words, the loss of what was believed to have been the bulk of *jahili* prose was bemoaned before Islam was two centuries old. In the Qur’an, there are numerous references to books, writing, tomes, writing tablets, records, codices and so forth, but the context suggests their association either with divine ordinances and revelations or with formal documents, and not with literature in the broad sense of the term. In what, then, is this prose supposed to have consisted?

The views of second/eighth century Muslim men of letters are in point of fact all we have on this subject. There are the wise sayings of various sages, fragments of rhymed prose from the mouths of soothsayers, the tribal lore in which *jahili* poetry is embedded and a corpus of Biblical, Mesopotamian and Yemeni antiquities. Taken together, this material provided the bulk of information on the pre-Islamic period in early-Islamic historical and literary works. Although Islamic scholars undoubtedly recast this material, much of it must have been the common and undifferentiated property of the *rawiyas* and *qussas* of Arabia who continued to supply this lore for centuries after the coming of Islam:

You ordered me [writes the famous philologist al-Asma‘i (d. 213/828) to his patron] to collect what has reached me of the reports of ancient Arab kings . . . I found it a difficult task to accomplish fully because of the paucity of information . . . I travelled widely among the tribes, searching out the transmitters of reports and keepers of ancient histories until I extracted all the stories of the genealogists and learnt the tales related by old men regarding their ancestors.⁹

The Arabian tribal lore, the so-called Battle-days of the Arabs (*Ayyam al-‘Arab*) and the Biblical and Near-Eastern antiquities (*Isra‘iliyyat*) are the two largest collections of prose narratives reputedly dating from pre-Islamic times. The *Ayyam*, as transmitted for example by Abu ‘Ubayda Ma‘mar ibn al-Muthanna (d. 209/824), bear clear signs of the editorial activity of their transmitter. A typical Battle-day begins with a raid by a single hero or a small band who carry away camels or horses. Rape is often committed and women frequently reveal the identity of the raiders. An angry confrontation follows which then leads to the battle itself. The confrontations often include proverbial sayings while the battles are preceded or followed by verses full of blood and threats and generally inferior in merit to the *jahili* odes. Neither date nor duration is ever specified. A stylized, deliberately archaic mood is created and then enhanced by the

⁸ Jahiz, *Bayan*, 1:287; cf. Ibn Rashiq, *‘Umda*, 1:8.

⁹ Asma‘i, *Tarikh al-‘Arab Qabl al-Islam*, p. 3.

transmitter's commentary on the verses which is normally confined to short linguistic glosses.¹⁰

The *Isra'iliyyat* and Yemeni antiquities are commonly associated with the name of Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 114/732), a Yemenite of Persian descent and usually regarded as the most influential propagator of this material. Biblical, quasi-biblical and apocryphal tales together with Yemenite historical lore here also betray the art of their Islamic editor to the point where it is impossible to arrive at any meaningful judgement on the form or substance of pre-Islamic prose.¹¹

What are we to conclude, then, from this summary of the *jahili* Arabian environment in which the Qur'anic view of history was to emerge? One may speak of an environment in which there is a sharpening in the perception of a common identity, probably as a reaction to increased political, religious and cultural penetration of the Peninsula by its neighbours. A string of new northern towns was becoming proudly aware of its place in the affairs of a much larger world and a roving band of poets was of crucial importance in spreading a common language and ethos among the tribes. Their poetry, in which narrative defers to moralizing and the lines of verse are neatly bisected, bears a significant resemblance to Qur'anic narrative and early-Islamic historiographic forms. But there is little in this epic scene framed by the causality of the *Dahr* which prepares us for the arrival of the Qur'an. Later Islamic scholars were to return repeatedly to the history and culture of *jahili* Arabia, and some would make of it the natural recipient of revelation, citing such things as the purity of its desert air or the rarefied souls of its inhabitants. *Jahili* culture, however, was essentially pre-literate. Written texts were almost exclusively religious or legal in nature. Although a common memory was slowly crystallizing, this is not by itself a sufficient precondition for the appearance of historical thought and writing. The Arabs learnt a new history when they acquired a new religion.

An axial text is an end and a beginning, a *summa* and a programme for thought and action, a theory and its paradigms. The Qur'an is a source of ideas on history as well as a repository of historical examples offered for contemplation. It proclaims its own appearance *as a book* as an event of seismic proportions:

If We sent down this Qur'an upon a mountain, you would see it humbled, shattered by the fear of God (Qur'an 59:21).

¹⁰ The *Ayyam* of Abu 'Ubayda are conveniently assembled in 'Adil J. al-Bayati, *Kitab Ayyam al-'Arab Qabl al-Islam* (Beirut: 'Alam al-Kutub, 1987).

¹¹ On Wahb, see A. A. Duri, *The Rise of Historical Writing Among the Arabs*, ed. and trans. Lawrence I. Conrad (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), chapter 3, with updated bibliography on Wahb by the editor-translator. See also R. G. Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972).

8 The birth of a tradition

A document of its own time and place but also from, and of eternity, the Qur'an repeatedly contrasts human affairs with divine providence, calling itself 'the Distinguisher' and 'the Reminder'. Two time-scales with two corresponding orders of existence are set forth side by side, the one earthly and illusory, the other divine and real. The Qur'an's 'descent' (*nuzul*) into the world is an occurrence which intersects the earthly order, creating a new historical era where truth (*al-haqq*) can finally and manifestly be distinguished from falsehood (*al-batil*). To explore these issues in more detail, three principal Qur'anic themes may be singled out: the vision of history, the narratives of prophets and kings and views of man and his place in the order of things.

1. *The vision of history*

The Qur'anic vision of history rests upon a certain conception of time and space and a certain style to express that conception. Islam and history are coeval: 'It was God who called you Muslims from days of old'. (22:78) A community, or *umma*, of God has from time immemorial been the 'witnesses' of God on earth, 'calling to virtue and forbidding evil'. It is a 'community of the centre' (*ummatah wasatan*) which came into being with Adam. Thereafter, the Qur'an pans over a landscape where time is less a chronology than a continuum, where Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad are all described in a grammatical tense which one is tempted to call the eternal present. The whole of history is present at once to God. Within this design, events are arranged in clusters, repetitive in form. This means that a Qur'anic *qissa*, or tale, is closer in function and meaning to a 'case in point', an 'affair' or even a 'parable' than it is to a story or narrative. 'As when [*idh*] Joseph . . .' or 'as when Moses . . .' is a common introductory phrase to the Qur'anic *qasas* (variant of *qissa*), suggesting an extended moral example or paradigm which is often repeated with only minor changes to suit the moral (*'ibra*) at hand. To know God is, among other things, to recognize the overwhelming evidence of His presence in the past:

Have they not journeyed in the land and seen how those before them met their end? They were stronger than them in might, they cultivated the land and built upon it more than they did. (30:9)

Qasas is contrasted with *asatir*, which are mere fables or legends, false or devoid of moral. 'We relate to you the best of *qasas*' implies a choice, a divinely selected anthology of history based upon the factual accuracy and didactic value of each *qissa*. Where there is doubt or dispute concerning historical figures, the Qur'an corrects the record:

Such was Jesus, son of Mary; this is the truth of the matter concerning which they are in doubt. (29:34)

To warn, to remind, to authenticate the past: these are the primary functions of the *qasas*. They record and illustrate history as seen from the divine point of view, a history moreover whose three modes of past, present and future are run together. History is an on-going plot where God is the ultimate 'schemer':

They scheme and God schemes, and God is the best of schemers. (8:30)

The inscrutable, impersonal *Dahr* of *jahili* Arabia is a mere delusion:

They say: there is nothing but our earthly life. We die, we are born and only the *Dahr* destroys us. But they have no knowledge of this for they are only guessing . . . Say: It is God who gives you life, then makes you die, then restores you to life upon the Day of Resurrection, of which there is no doubt. But most of mankind is ignorant. (45:24–6)

Events acquire their moral significance from their '*aqiba*, or outcome, and this '*aqiba* is at the same time the '*ibra*, or moral, of the narrative, a key-word in later Islamic historiography. To think an event through is to perceive that this is a universe full of God's signs (*ayat*). That other universe of the poets, with its *Dahr* and *Manaya*, is peopled by the ignorant or self-deceived, is indeed the *jahili* universe of doubt and despair.

Of time past, the basic units in the Qur'an are generations (*qurun*) and peoples (*umam*). The time-scale is vast: a day with God is a 'thousand years' or even 'fifty thousand years' by human reckoning (32:5; 70:4). All time is intense, equidistant from God. The *qurun* and *umam* are summoned to mind to show how mankind is repeatedly seduced into paganism, dictatorial kingship and corrupting luxury and the outcome in each case is divine punishment. By sheer dint of repetition, fact becomes parable. Hence all events are ethically charged, all are at once real and allegorical.

2. Narratives of prophets and kings

The Qur'anic view of prophecy is an extension of its view of time's eternal presentness. The prophets of the Qur'an are types of moral life. They reveal essentially the same message and their lives follow closely similar patterns. Theirs is the story of the lonely voice crying out against the injustice or indifference of his community and undergoing similar social, political and spiritual crises. Their credibility is always at stake, and turmoil seems to be an inescapable consequence of their mission. The following passages set forth the broad outlines of the history of prophecy:

Mankind was one nation; then God sent the prophets, bearing good tidings and forewarning. With them He sent down Scripture with the truth to judge mankind concerning their differences. And only those to whom Scripture was sent differed concerning it, and this after clear signs had come to them, because of their transgression. And God, by His leave, guided those who believed to the truth concerning which they had differed. (2:213)

10 The birth of a tradition

Every Nation resolved to seize their prophet and disputed with falsehood in order to refute the truth. Then I seized them, and what a punishment it was! (40:5)

Then We sent Our messengers, one after another. Whenever its messenger came to a nation, they called him a liar. So We caused them to follow one another and made them parables. Away with a people who do not believe! (23:44)

Now that all nations have received prophets, the Qur'an announces the end of the cycle. Prophecy, so to speak, has run its course. The lessons of the past have been amply vindicated. The 'book with the truth' is a summary of God's repeated interference in history, which thereby gains the coherence of a pattern made decisively clear. It is Abraham who first demonstrates the naturalness of belief in God: the stars, the moon and the sun are examined by him and in turn rejected as objects of worship in favour of Him Who created them. (6:75–9) Muhammad 'seals' this belief by revealing the book of God. Between these two epochal figures countless messengers are sent to mankind:

Messengers We have told you of and messengers We have not . . . messengers bearing good tidings and warning, so that mankind might have no argument against God. (4:164–5)

When examined closely, the stories of these messengers are found to be variations on a single theme which, when repeated, often with the same phrases from one prophet to another, creates an impression of one divine revelation frustrated by pride or ignorance, opposed by powerful kings or corrupted by the wilful distortions of disputing schismatics. The obviousness of religious truth as demonstrated by Abraham needs to be reaffirmed over and over: in the Qur'an the messengers argue the case for God in debates with opponents punctuated by the 'he said . . . they said' of polemic and the 'O you who' of rhetoric. The message is distinct and clear (*mubin*) and yet the majority of mankind 'do not understand'. This is what gives the prophetic *qasas* a grim sense of missions unfulfilled and of human insolence rising to challenge the divine call. Hence prophets are always followed by cataclysms in which entire *qurun* and *umam* suddenly vanish, leaving behind the magnificent ruins that are the silent reminders of past grandeur:

There stand their dwellings, empty ruins because of the evil they committed. Here indeed is a sign for a people who understand. (27:52)

The most prominent enemies of the Prophets are the kings, who typify human pride at its peak. At their head stands Fir'awn (Pharaoh), a major Qur'anic figure. His struggle against Moses prefigures the entire history of the relationship between prophets and kings, a theme of recurring importance in Islamic historical thought and writing. Fir'awn is tyrannical, blasphemes before the 'signs of God', fights divine truth with magic and